

To Hell With Tomorrow

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Summary: 35 years into the future and Slaying has taken on a whole new scope. Gabriel Giles attempts to cheat death and learns that things happen for a reason

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>Author's note: The character of Gabriel Giles was introduced in a previous BtVS story I wrote entitled "Divergent Paths".

>* * *

>"So you can help me?" Gabriel asked the ancient looking woman. She crouched before him in the seat of a large wicker chair, which, for all intents and purposes, was a throne. She was frighteningly thin, with dark brown skin that was marked with an intricate pattern of fine wrinkles. Her eyes were like tiny black jewels embedded in the folds of her face and were alive with vibrancy and intelligence. He could hear a disturbing, hollow rattle in her lungs as she breathed, but when he looked at her, he could see a resilient inner strength that sustained her frail form.

>Gabriel had left Sunnydale two months ago and been following the habits of the gypsy band for the last three weeks, watching and waiting. They were not like the gypsies of Europe, choosing to live modern lives and meeting with the rest of their band only once every month, during the full moon. After tonight's meeting, they would put on their business suits and drive away in their flashy sports cars, returning to their lives in the city once again until next month. He had been surprised to find a gypsy band in this part of North America, let alone one as ancient and knowledgeable as the Qu'ayarvi band. After tailing one of their members for miles along an intricate and convoluted route, he had found their secret meeting place. The guards had met him with stern refusal and drawn pistols, but the elderly woman, the clan's leader, had insisted that he be allowed entrance. She had taken him to an opulent motor home which was parked at the center of the camp and served as both her home and audience room. The odd setting mattered little to Gabriel. At the moment, his mind was consumed with only one thing.

>"Help you? Yes," The wizened woman regarded him shrewdly, "but not in the way that you believe."

>"What do you mean?" he asked desperately. This had to work. Time was already running out. "You're the troupe mother. You must know the ancient rights."

>"Oh, I do, young man, I do." She answered, shaking her head, "But you are not ready."

>"Please you must help me." He pleaded, "I have to go back. I need to change the past." His shoulders sagged under the weight of his guilt. Just over two months ago his father had been killed and Gabriel felt it had been his fault. Since then, he had spent every waking moment looking for a way to change things. This might have been his only chance to set things right again.

>"You live too much in yesterday. You would do better to think about tomorrow." The troupe mother shifted stiffly in her huge wicker chair and handed him a cup and saucer from the stand next to her. "Here, a cup of tea will help calm you."

>"I don't care about tomorrow." He accepted the tea cup only to quickly lay it aside. "To hell with tomorrow! I need to do something about yesterday."

>The elderly woman's dark eyes glittered knowingly. "To hell with tomorrow, you say. That's an interesting choice of words. Be warned. You may not care about tomorrow, but tomorrow is determined by today and today is determined by yesterday. Change the past and you will change the future."

>"That's exactly what I intend to do." He answered with unwavering conviction.

>"I see that I cannot dissuade you." The woman sighed, "And let it never be said that the Qu'ayarvi have refused assistance to a living Seventh Son. I will help you."

>Gabriel relaxed visibly. He was one step closer to his goal now. The old woman fished around along a stack of small shelves beside her, gathering a handful of powder packets and herbs. Sitting forward, she pointed with a gnarled finger. "Hand me that book on the wall behind you. And the silver bowl, as well."

>Obediently, he retrieved the two items and handed them to her. Setting up a circle of candles on a footstool before her, she lit them and placed a metal tripod over the flames. The elderly woman then set the silver bowl atop the tripod and filled it with water from a water skin. She poured three packets of powder into the warming water and tossed two more into Gabriel's lap. "Put this in your tea and drink it. The water should be ready by then."

>Gabriel eyed the powders warily. Recent events had made him distrustful of consuming unknown substances.

>"Come now." The troupe mother pressed with a commanding wave of her hand. "You've come this far. Are you afraid to take this small step?"

>Mustering his resolve, he tore the corners of each of the packets and poured them into his teacup. The powders dissolved quickly in the hot tea. The drink tasted strong and bitter and by the time he had finished it, the herbal mixture in the bowl was beginning to steam.

>"Now, " the woman urged him to lean over the bowl with her. "Look into the bowl and think about where you want to be and what it is you want to do."

>Gabriel closed his eyes and let the steam bathe his face and fill his lungs. It made his head feel light and a wave of prickling tingles rushed over him. He remembered standing before the portal to the demon dimension. The Sword of Seals, the weapon which had opened

the portal in the first place, juttred from the forehead of a terrible, tentacled demon. He was holding tightly to his father's hands, the only thing keeping the man from being drawn across the rift by the retreating, dying creature. But then a bone broke in his arm and he had lost his grip. His father had been dragged screaming through the portal seconds before the Sword scraped across the threshold and sealed it behind him. The Sword was the key. With it, he could save his father. The gypsy mother's words wafted hauntingly through his mind. Change the past and you will change the future. The future . . .

>A tingling sensation washed over him and his body clenched tightly against itself. He felt like he was falling. The feeling rushed over him in dizzying waves and he thought his stomach might rebel. Just as the strain grew too great, the disorienting sickness abruptly ceased. Gabriel opened his eyes and found that he was lying on the ground and that the gypsy troupe was nowhere to be seen. He stood up slowly in a world that was not his own, careful to be sure of his footing on the unfamiliar, broken, blasted ground. The air carried a whiff of sulfur and the skies were dark, shot through with streaks of glowing red. Overhead, the moon was nowhere to be seen. Instead, a creature that looked like a giant manta ray sailed by and released a terrifying shriek. Quickly, he bolted and ducked behind a sharp outcropping of rock to hide.

>His mind was clouded in obscuring fog. Everything was gone, his past, even his name. He couldn't remember who he was, but he knew that something was wrong.

>Breathing heavily in panic, he pressed an open palm to the center of his chest. "Where am I?"

>* * *

>He had been walking for what seemed like hours. Everywhere he went, he found the same thing. Seared earth, burnt out and abandoned buildings, and the wreckage of old vehicles. Gradually, portions of his memory had returned as he walked, filling in the blank spots in his head like pieces to a puzzle. He remembered the gypsy troupe mother and the spell she had cast on him. But this wasn't what he had wished for. He crawled down a jagged slope of upturned pavement and approached a scorched and twisted metal road sign. He ran his hand slowly over its cold surface, leaving trails in the soot with his fingers. A brightly colored banner had been emblazoned boldly across the blasted metal with blue and yellow spray paint. 'The Human Resistance Lives!' it read. Rubbing off more of the soot, he read the lettering underneath.

>"Over here!" a woman's voice shouted in the distance, "Just over this hill. I can feel it."

>A series of voices answered her, getting close by the sound of it. A group of silhouettes crested a distant ridge. One of them raised a weapon to its shoulder and a dull pop sounded. Instantly, a piece of the brick next to Gabriel shattered, spraying debris in all directions. Gabriel dove into a roll and started running.

>Crouching low, he narrowly avoided a volley of gunfire. He whipped around the corner of an old building and broke into the open. The ground exploded in front of him in a hail of sparks and odd, sharp, ricochet sounds. They were gaining on him. He had to find cover. Fast.

>He circled the rusted shell of an old truck and slipped inside another building. Grabbing up a broken board, he backed into a shadowed corner, between an open window and the doorway.

>"Over here." One of them directed, "It went inside that building."

>Their voices were getting closer; they knew where he was hiding. He could hear the pounding of their heavy boots, the jingling of their metal gear, even the harshness of their breaths. Getting closer and closer. Gripping his makeshift club tightly, he waited for the first of them to enter the doorway.

>A shadow fell into the room and he reacted. He swung with strength born of fear and connected solidly with the man's face. The wooden board cracked and the man collapsed with a strangled moan.

>"It's got a weapon!" another of his pursuers shouted. "Hustle! Hustle! Move in!"

>Gabriel smashed his fist into the speaker's throat and shoved him sprawling head over heels. A bullet bounced off the doorjamb, barely an inch above his head as he snapped a sharp kick into another's chest. Ducking back inside, he leaped for the window. More bullets bounced off the wall as he sailed through and hit the ground, scrambling to escape.

>A heavy weight hit him from behind, strong hands grasping for his throat, and he stumbled forward. Acting purely on instinct, he drove a hard elbow back into his attacker's ribs and was rewarded with a high-pitched, animal-like yelp. Spinning, he threw the attacker off him and sent it tumbling with a solid kick. He bounded down the slope, jumping over a deep crevasse. As his feet connected with the ground on the other side, a tall, beautiful dark-haired girl with strangely familiar green eyes stepped in front of him, her fist cocked, and slammed her knuckles into his chin. The solid impact, combined with his own forward momentum, knocked him flat.

>"Don't move!" the girl commanded, whipping out a strange looking shotgun and holding it steadily pointed at his head.

>Looking closely at her, he felt like he was in a bad action movie. The girl wore a battered police helmet, painted black and decorated with streaks of red. There was a small greenish scope, similar to the night vision goggles he had once read about, that hung over one of her almond shaped, emerald green eyes. Her clothes were black, a makeshift uniform of some sort, with swatches of red and mismatched pieces of metal armor attached at various points on her body. The toes of her boots were capped in worn metal as were the knuckles of her fingerless leather gloves.

>"Get up." She commanded sternly, pressing the barrel of the gun to his forehead.

>Raising his hands in surrender, he complied. The green eyed girl backed off a step and kept her weapon trained unerringly on a point directly between his eyes as he rose. The sweat on his body turned chill with fear. He looked down the cold metal barrel of the gun and closed his eyes, waiting for the bullet that would end his life.

>"What are you waiting for, Alex?" an unfamiliar girl's voice asked teasingly. "You going to do him or are we going to sit here until nightfall?"

>A few of the dozen or so soldiers raised their voices in assent, joking amongst themselves. Gabriel's fear evolved into outrage and anger. They were laughing at the thought of murdering him! Opening his eyes, he fixed Alex with a baleful glare. Their eyes met and a surge of strong familiarity shot through him.

>"No." the helmeted girl's pink lips tightened momentarily, "There's something different about this one. We'll take him prisoner." With a practiced flip of her wrist, she holstered her weapon against her thigh and started back up the hill.

>A young soldier approached Alex cautiously. "Do you think that's such a good idea?"

>Her hand shot out in an instant, catching the young man around the throat. Pulling him in until they were face to face, she tightened her grip.

>"Who is the commander of this squadron, Private?" she demanded, her voice as hard and dangerous as sharpened steel.

>"Y-You are." The soldier coughed.

>"Then, as long as I am, you will obey my orders. Understand?" With one hand, she threw him back into the arms of his comrades as if he weighed no more than a child. "Dar, get the prisoner ready for transport."

>A short, slender girl with honey blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes hopped down the small hill with a cheery smile. She wore the same type of uniform as the others, but made of lighter material and adorned with far less metal. The only exception was the knuckles of the gloves she wore on her delicate looking hands. She had no helmet, preferring instead a red and black streaked headband to hold the short, spiky hair out of her eyes. Like Alex, something about her seemed familiar to him. Had he known them at one time? She stooped to fish a length of rope out of a bag at her side and winced, rubbing gingerly at her ribs.

>"Nice kick back there, Jackrabbit." She smiled in a way that was both shy and yet wolfish, "I'll have to pay you back for it sometime."

>He looked pointedly at the rope in her hand, refusing to speak.

>"Okay, then." Dar shrugged, unconcerned, "You can be quiet all you want. Makes no diff to me." She reached up and nudged his head back. "Chin up, please."

>He slowly looked up at the black and red sky with a resigned sigh. At this point he didn't really have much choice. Something as hard as steel and swift as a lightning bolt collided with his jaw. The world jerked violently and went hazy. His knees buckled and he dropped to the hard ground. He could distantly hear the blonde girl humming contently to herself as she efficiently flipped him over on his belly and tied his wrists and thumbs together. The rough jostling was all it took to push him over the edge into sheer blackness.

>He awoke in a dimly lit rectangular room. There was a dull hum in his ears and every few seconds, the room felt like it bounced. This isn't in a room, he realized, it's some sort of vehicle. And it's moving. Gabriel sat up swiftly and instantly regretted it. His skull throbbed with a splitting headache. When he tried to reach for his temples, he found his hands couldn't move. Distantly, he remembered that he was a prisoner. While he was unconscious, someone had bound his ankles together, too.

>"Hey, he's up." a young man's voice noted. Gabriel heard the sound as if his ears were filled with water. "Looks like you didn't hit him hard enough, Dar. I think you're slipping."

>"Pfff, yeah, right." The petite girl gave the commenter a good-natured shove, "You want to let me have a try on YOUR jaw?"

>The squadron was seated on a pair of long benches facing each other like in a subway. The black haired girl with the police helmet sat away from the others, in the seat across from him. Dar squeezed down the aisle and sat next to Gabriel. "Hey, Jackrabbit," she piped, reaching out and poking his head with a slim finger, "How's your melon?"

>Hissing in irritation, he jerked away from her.

>"You sure he's clean, Alex?" Dar leaned around him and peered into

his eyes, squinting as if looking through a dirty window. "Check out these eyes. Never seen a human with yellow in his eyes before. You think he can talk? It'd be a real waste if he's a flatline. He's a looker."

>"He's human, just maybe a little more so than most, that's all. And he can talk." Alex stated flatly from her seat, "He just doesn't want to." She sat with her hand resting on her helmet on the seat beside her. Her soft, black hair was swept carelessly over one shoulder and her sharp green eyes were locked on Gabriel. "Do you?"

>"I don't make a habit of talking to people who try to shoot me." He declared coldly, fixing her with an accusing glare.

>"If I was the one who took a shot at you back there, you'd be feeding the scavengers right now, " she snorted, "or worse."

>"So why didn't you?" he frowned.

>"Because, I got a sense from you." She looked him over curiously, "I know you're a good person. I just don't know why, yet."

>"You got a 'sense'?" he saw it in her now, a power similar to his own Second Sight, but the pain in his head refused to allow him to look deeper.

>"Alex gets a feel for people." Dar leaned across him excitedly and prodded Alex's shoulder. "She's real good at it. Sniffs demons out better than any of the trackers. Something about you got her radar freaking. That's why we were after you." She grinned, tracing a fingertip across Gabriel's bruised jaw. "Either that or Alex has finally decided to catch herself a man."

>Alex scowled at the comment, but the others in the squadron chuckled guardedly. "Let me apologize for them." Alex spread her hands. "It's been a long patrol. They're just blowing off some steam."

>Dar sidled up next to him. "Yeah, Jackrabbit, no sweat. We're all a bunch of pussycats at heart."

>"My name is Gabriel." He grumbled. The name came back to him in an instant, as if he had never forgotten it.

>"Gabriel, huh?" the blonde smiled, "I like that. I'm Dar, short for Darlene."

>"Short for everything!" one of her teammates called jokingly.

>"Shut it, Cavanaugh!" she returned, smirking over her shoulder.

>Gabriel shifted uncomfortably, wiggling his arms to get the blood moving again.

>Looking him over carefully, Alex pursed her lips in thought. "How did you stay alive out there for this long?" she asked suspiciously, "You a collaborator or something?"

>"A what?" his brows knitted together in confusion.

>"You don't know what a collaborator is?" Darlene giggled uproariously, "You MUST be a flatline. It wasn't always this way, but nowadays, if you're human, you're either part of the Resistance, a collaborator or dead."

>"And you're all part of this Resistance?" he arched an eyebrow dubiously. None of them appeared to be much older than he was.

>"Hellooo," she made a tapping motion toward his skull, "home base to squadron!? What do you think, that I wear this get-up because it compliments my figure? Which it does, incidentally."

>"We hunt the demons." Alex stated, tapping a slender finger to her temple. "I feel 'em out and then we blow them to bits."

>Frowning, he looked at the dark haired girl, earnestly. "How long has it been like this?"

>"Like what?"

>"The darkness, the sky looking like its on fire, demons walking around freely, all of it." He watched her face carefully. There was something about her that made him want to trust her. Despite her gruff demeanor, she was brave, intelligent and straightforward, he could see it in her, all of which made her the best choice to ask questions of.

>"Who knows?" Darlene interjected, "Alex's older than anyone else here and it's been this way since she can remember. My big brother was born just after the millenium and even he doesn't remember. All this is old news, Gabriel. You really have been out of the game. Where have you been all your life?"

>After the millenium. The words rang in his mind like a gong. After, meaning it had already occurred and not recently by his impression. Somehow, something had gone wrong with the gypsy spell and it had sent him into the future instead of the past. But the future was a nightmare. He shook his head slowly in disbelief.

>"Ever hear of a guy named Van Winkle?" he chuckled bitterly.

>"Who?" both girls made a distasteful face.

>"Never mind." He turned away from them, and stared into the wall. His mind was in turmoil, whirling with the implications of his predicament. Darlene quickly grew bored and climbed down the aisle to sit with the rest of her comrades. Alex remained. He could feel her eyes on him, studying him with curious detachment.

>The vehicle slowed and came to a jarring halt. Halfway up the length of the wall, a door opened downward with a hiss of released pressure, forming a ramp way to the ground.

>"All right, everybody out. We made it again." Alex shouted the command, rising to her feet. "We're home."

>The soldiers cheered, happily clapping each other on the back, and scampered down the ramp. Gabriel rolled to one side, but couldn't get to his feet. Dar watched him struggle comically for a moment before her face broke in a wide grin.

>"Let me give you a hand." She suggested. With only moderate effort, she bent down and scooped him up over her shoulder. Gabriel didn't bother to protest. It would make no difference, he knew. Best to endure the humiliation and find out what was going on.

>They entered a wide, windowless chamber, brightly lit by circular overhead lights and lined with what appeared to be fire extinguisher pipes along the ceiling. There was a certain coldness to the room, a sterility that caused his nose to wrinkle. Looking back, he noticed that the vehicle they had come out of looked like a short subway car, only sleeker. That explained the lack of windows. Wherever he was now, it was underground.

>Alex was the last to leave the car. She exited behind Dar, watching him as he hung unceremoniously, his head dangling down by the petite blonde's belt. Simultaneously, the two girls came to a halt.

>"How went the hunt?" a deep male voice asked in a friendly tone.

>"Better than usual." Darlene bobbed Gabriel's limp body on her shoulder, "Look what I found. You think they'll let me keep him?" Snickering, she slapped him pertly in the rump.

>Gabriel straightened in outrage, his eyes widening and his face flushing.

>"That's enough, Dar." Alex pulled Gabriel off her friend's shoulder and set him on his feet. Smoothly, she slipped a keen edged knife out of her boot and sliced through the bonds around his ankles then removed the ropes around his wrists and thumbs. "I'll take care of

him from here."

>"Oh, you're no fun." Darlene pouted.

>Gabriel stepped from foot to foot a few times, rubbing his arms, reveling in the renewed blood flow. He nodded his thanks to Alex and looked over her shoulder at the man who had spoken earlier. He appeared to be in his mid twenties and he was tall, taller than Gabriel, with jet black hair that fell in an unruly mass to just past his shoulders. His eyes were equally dark, with serious brows and a thin, straight scar running between them. An intricate blue pattern was tattooed over his left eye. Sporting a well kept black goatee and a pair of gold hoop earrings in each ear, he reminded Gabriel somewhat of the Gypsy men of the Qu'ayarvi. He wore the same type of uniform as the others, save that where theirs were red, his was a tawny gold.

>"Who is this?" he regarded Gabriel suspiciously, his hand slipping down to the butt of a pistol at his belt.

>"His name is Gabriel." Alex stepped protectively in front of him.

"He's a toplander. We found him on the outskirts."

>The dark-haired young man shook his head. "He's no toplander. Look at him. I had more scars than he does by the time I was five. Any toplander as old as this would either go feral or flatline by now."

>"Lay off, Cole." Alex snapped a little too quickly, "It doesn't matter where he's from. What matters is that he is here now. I'm taking him into the central complex." She pressed her fist to her chin in troubled thought. "Besides, I have to give my report to the Head Director."

>"What do you think they're going to do with him, Alex?" Cole questioned seriously, "You know he's just going to get dumped topside again. Even if he is any good to us, we can't afford the security risk."

>"I don't care." She stated firmly, "I found him, so I decide what to do with him."

>"Fine." Cole folded his arms across his chest angrily, "Do what you want. Once the Council finds out he's here it won't matter anyway. Why do you have to be so damn infuriating?"

>"Once in a while, Cole, a soldier has to act on faith. This is no ordinary toplander. I can feel it." She took Gabriel gently by the arm, turning her back to Cole. "Are you all right to walk?" When he nodded, she guided him toward a clean, well-lit hallway.

>Cole stared at them as they walked, painfully aware of her hand on the toplander's arm. Alex was a gruff girl, more accustomed to breaking men's arms than holding them. He didn't like the way she was so steadfastly protective of the toplander without knowing, or even wanting to know, a thing about him. Fuming, he stalked away. Darlene, rolling her eyes toward the roof, shrugged helplessly, and headed for her quarters with a carefree smile.

>"Don't worry about Cole, Gabriel." Alex assured him as they walked, "He's Terakan. They're born that way."

>"Terakan?" he asked, "As in the Order of Teraka?"

>"Yeah," she shrugged, "Or what's left of it. Some people say he'll be their next leader, but I don't think so. A purebred human could never lead the Order."

>"Where are we going?" Gabriel asked as they turned down another corridor. The architecture became more rounded as they traveled deeper into the base. With wide cylindrical hallways, it made him feel like he was walking in a giant tube.

>"To see someone important." She answered shortly. Her footsteps grew more hurried and her eyes were locked straight ahead. Anticipation was apparent on her face.

>They approached a rectangular metal door. Faintly painted runes were scrawled along the outline of the door and a roughly hand-carved wooden sign was posted in the center. "The Rosenbergs," was painted across it in crooked, childlike letters. It was an odd combination, the dark mystery of sorcery alongside something as innocuous as a child's craft.

>Alex stopped at the door and pounded on it with the heel of her fist. The latch rattled from the other side and the heavy door creaked open. A small, plump woman, perhaps in her fifties, with short, gray-streaked, auburn hair and coffee brown eyes, smiled when she saw Alex and pulled her into a loving hug. There was an indefinable familiarity about the old woman, much stronger than what he had felt when he had first encountered Alex or Dar.

>"Alex, you're back!" the woman exclaimed, on the edge of joyful tears, "We were so worried for you."

>"Hey, you know no grubby demon can take me, Nanna." Alex straightened her back and proudly thumped herself on the chest.

>"Of course not, but I still worry." The old woman regarded her with an incongruously youthful pride.

>"I want you to meet someone." Alex pulled Gabriel into view by the arm, "Nanna, this is . . ."

>"Gabriel." The middle aged woman gasped, her hand flying to her mouth and her eyes widening as she stumbled back. Gabriel recognized her suddenly, his heart leaping against his ribs. One look at her face and a rush of memory resurfaced in a flood of images and feelings. He knew that she had looked familiar, but he'd had no idea why until now.

>"Nanna! What's wrong?" Alex grasped the woman's arm fearfully.

>"Go inside, child." Nanna gestured sharply, "Get your uncle!"

>Alex bounded into the interior of the room, quick to obey. When she was gone, the middle aged woman recovered, straightening.

>"Gabriel," she smiled warmly, reaching out and touching her fingers to his face. "It's been so long. What happened to you?"

>"Willow." He clasped her hands and held them tightly to his lips. He was so glad to finally find someone in this madness that he recognized. Almost.

>"But you're not him." Willow whispered sadly. "Or not the Gabriel I think you are, at least."

>"Willow, what happened here?" he asked seriously, "Why are you so . . ."

>"Old?" she finished for him with a wry smirk. Even in her mid fifties, Willow still retained her childlike innocence. "A better question might be why are you still so young?" Tugging on his hands, she led him inside.

>Alex returned, dragging a wiry, gray haired, gray bearded man wearing a bright yellow bathrobe and loose black pants, into the room with her. He was short and stocky with sparse gray hairs sprouting all over his body.

>The grizzled man fretted and fussed under Alex's attention, grumbling sleepily and rubbing at his beard. The old man stopped when he saw Gabriel, and took a step back in surprise.

>"Whoa." He blurted mildly, his voice rich and deep, "You're back."

>"Back?" Alex frowned, "Do you two know him?"

>Willow jumped to respond before her husband. "We knew someone very

much like him." She explained, "A long time ago. Alex, why don't you run along and give your report to the Head Director. Then maybe you could check on Darlene. I feel better when you're around to keep an eye on her."

>"Wait a minute. SOMETHING is going on here." Alex reasoned cannily, "Why won't you tell me?"

>"Alex," the old man intoned deeply, "Do what your aunt says. Please."

>Alex looked suspicious, but dutifully obeyed, slowly walking out the door. When the door closed behind her, Willow breathed a sigh of relief. "I can't believe she left so agreeably. It's not like her to ignore a mystery."

>"She knows something's up." The gray haired man shrugged knowingly, "She's got that look in her eyes. One way or another, she'll find out what it is. The question isn't what we tell her, but how much."

>Willow paused in troubled thought, then, remembering her guest, snapped out of it.

>"Gabriel," she smiled, "You remember Oz, don't you?"

>Gabriel clasped Oz's thick hand in his own. It gratified him to see the two of them still together after all this time. Even if, to him, it was hardly any time at all. "How could I forget?" he smiled.

>Oz fished a battered pair of spectacles out of the pocket of his robe and put them on. Leaning forward, he squinted at Gabriel. "I knew there was something different about you. Or maybe not different enough. What do you think, Willow, dear? Clone maybe?"

>The old witch rubbed her chin in thought. "No. No, I don't think so." She held a clear crystal up to her eye and looked in Gabriel's direction with the other eye closed. "I don't sense a seeming or anything. What we're seeing is real."

>Oz quirked his nose a few times. "Smells like the real thing, too. If you're a spy, Gabriel, then you're a damn good one."

>Willow scratched her head. "So where did you come from? What do you remember, Gabriel?" She led him to a plush chair and gently urged him to sit, taking the seat opposite him.

>Gabriel sat down, holding his head in his hands. It was all so blurry, like the canvas of his memory had been smeared by an inept hand, but, after a moment of concentration, he was able to recall. "I was with a band of gypsies. The troupe mother cast a spell that was supposed to send me back in time."

>"A tempus enchantment. They're tricky work." Willow smoothed her hands down over the front of her dress and folded her fingers in her lap, "But instead of sending you into the past it sent you here. What year was it then?"

>"It wasn't long after the first time I met both of you." He paused remembering a little more, painful memories this time, "After my father . . . died. In 1999."

>"Makes sense." Willow and Oz nodded to one another. "Before the turn of the millenium."

>Oz smiled broadly and patted Gabriel roughly on the knee, squeezing into the chair next to his wife, "That was thirty-five years ago, Gabriel. My kids are older than you."

>"Thirty-five years?" Gabriel echoed softly, "You have kids now?"

>"You bet. Two of them." The grizzled man grinned proudly, "My oldest, Marcus, teaches sorcery to the students at the academy. They call him a techno-wizard, a real expert with magic and machines. He takes after his mother. And you've already met Darlene, by now."

>The blonde girl who had knocked him out. She was a half-were. No wonder she was so strong.

>Willow stroked her hand appreciatively across the back of his shoulders.

>"What happened?" Gabriel asked , "How did everything get . . . like this?"

>"No one really knows for sure." Oz tugged absently at his steel gray beard. "What we do know is that at the turn of the millenium, Mayor Wilkins succeeded with the Ascension and became known as Emperor after that. He opened the Hellmouth somehow and brought a flood of demons through. The first ones were hideous creatures. We called them Burrowers. They carved massive tunnels through the earth and lead their brethren to establish bases all over the world, all attached to the Hellmouth like spokes in a wheel. Not long after that, the Tower grew up around the Hellmouth and we were caught up in a full scale war."

>"Tower?" Gabriel queried, relaxing in his seat somewhat. Now that he was getting a better understanding of the situation, it felt like he was regaining some small measure of control over his life.

>"A huge living mountain that became like a base of operations for the Emperor and his demons." Oz answered, "We gathered as many people together to fight them as we could and formed the Human Resistance Movement back in '02. Things were pretty rocky at first, but it got better. We were actually winning for a while. It's more like a stalemate now."

>"What changed?"

>Willow rubbed at her eyes and rose quickly. "I-I'll get us something to drink." She said with a tight voice, and scurried quickly into the next room.

>Oz adjusted his spectacles, his eyes following her sadly. "It still hurts her to think about it sometimes. She'll be fine in a few minutes." He explained, turning back to face Gabriel. "Do you remember Xander?"

>Gabriel nodded, frowning as the name triggered another small resurgence of memories.

>"He went into politics right after the turn of the millenium." He whispered with a mild smirk, "Yeah, I know, none of us believed it at first either. Xander was never really any good at politicking, but when it came to blunt honesty, he was the man. There were so many empty promises and lies being spread around by politicians trying to explain what was happening. People really took to him. He got elected to the Senate back in 2009. Damndest thing I ever saw."

>He straightened in his chair and fixed his robe, taking a moment to go over the facts in his head. It seemed like it had all happened an entire lifetime ago.

>"With him and Buffy working together, support for the Resistance skyrocketed." He continued, "All of a sudden, we had scientists developing new weapons to use against the demons, strategists to lead the troops and more soldiers than we could count. People were tired of being preyed on, I guess."

>His eyes went distant as he looked back over the years at memories both pleasant and painful.

>"Things went in our favor for years. The two of them made a great team, her on the military side, him on the political side. We had the best fighters the world had to offer and with Senator Harris keeping everyone's spirits afloat, we were almost guaranteed to win. I think that's why the Emperor got so desperate. During Xander's Freedom Day speech, he sent an army of demons on a suicide run. We killed hundreds of them, the stench was ungodly, but a few still got

through. They assassinated him in front of the entire free world."

>"Oh, my God." Gabriel whispered, his jaw sagging open. Death was something he had only recently become acquainted with when his father had passed. Hearing about it in reference to someone else he knew was a little disturbing. He took a deep breath to steady himself.

>Oz stood up and started pacing slowly back and forth, his hands clasped behind his back. "In all the confusion that followed, support for the Resistance fell apart. The demons took back huge sections of territory and the different branches of the Movement lost contact with each other. Everything was in chaos. We know there are other resistance forces out there all over the globe, carrying on their own fight, but we have no way of communicating with them or even finding out where they are."

>"Where was Buffy throughout all this?" Gabriel was almost too afraid to ask.

>"Oh, she was fine." Oz shrugged it off as if it were nothing important. "Just a little busy, that's all. A baby can be a real handful."

>"Baby?" Gabriel gawked, "Buffy had a baby?"

>"Yeah, a girl." Oz smirked proudly, "Cutest little thing outside of my own two. Tough as nails, too. Don't you think?"

>Gabriel swallowed, hard. "Alex?"

>"Good guess. How did you know?"

>"I got a weird feeling from her when they captured me. It was a lot like the feeling I got from Buffy the first time I saw her. It didn't make a whole lot of sense until now. I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, huh?"

>"She's the best soldier I've ever seen, and that includes her mother." Oz agreed, "Buffy would have been proud."

>"Would have been?" Gabriel repeated, the words like a knell of doom in his ears.

>The pride in Oz's eyes clouded over with fresh sadness. "She was killed twelve years ago. When the first demons came through the Hellmouth, before the Resistance was around, they established what we call Hellspires. Think of them as living extensions of the Hellmouth all connected to the Tower as if it's a brain or a heart. Each one allows more demon matter to come through and instantly transport to anyplace where a Hellspire exists. They tried to raise a new one in Washington. Buffy charged in there totally fearless and blew the damn thing to bits. Did quite a job on the Emperor, too." He smiled wistfully, moisture gathering in his eyes. "Willow and I have been taking care of Alex ever since."

>Gabriel's chest tightened painfully. Of all the things that he had imagined, this was the worst. He couldn't believe it. "How could she die?" he questioned, his voice heavy with sorrow. "She was the Slayer."

>"Yeah, I did a lot of thinking about that." Oz nodded slowly, "She was older than any other Slayer on record. Forty-one, if I remember correctly. Kicking demon butt is no party once you hit that age, believe you me. As time went on, Buffy spent more and more time in the planning room than in actual battle. I think she knew we needed a Slayer in the field. Self sacrifice seems like something she'd do. Just don't tell Willow I said that. When she lets herself think of it, she likes to believe that it was all just a big mistake. I think it was the most heroic thing I've ever witnessed."

>"It must have worked then, did it? I mean you have Alex fighting for you now."

>"It did, but Alex is no Slayer. Even if she had been, she was only

eight at the time, too young to step up." Oz continued to pace, tugging thoughtfully at his beard. "We had a new Slayer within a month. And she lasted about three."

>"What?"

>"Killed by a two headed gate demon." he explained sadly, "Damn girl was just too careless. Another one arrived a month and a half after that. She survived almost a year. There were three more after her. None of them lasted more than two years. No one knows where the current Slayer is anymore. She ran from us when we contacted her and she's been missing for almost six years now."

>"So, in the end, she died for nothing." Gabriel felt drained. Calling this place a nightmare was being kind. He had landed in hell, pure and simple.

>"Yeah," he stopped tugging on his beard and let his hand fall to his side, "But I try not to look at it that way. You let yourself get down around here and you'll never get back up. The trick is to find the little pockets of goodness and cherish them. I have Alex and my own kids. Oh, and Willow, of course. Which reminds me. WILLOOWW! You can come out now!"

>The sweet old woman popped her head into the room almost immediately. "Oh, are you finished talking?" she mentioned innocently, "I was just coming back."

>"Gabriel is pretty well filled in on what's changed around here." Oz announced, "I think maybe we should take him to the briefing room, figure out what to do with him."

>"Does he know EVERYTHING?" she clasped her husband's hands and peered up at him.

>"He knows enough." Oz assured her.

>"What's in the briefing room?" Gabriel rose slowly out of his chair.

>"There's someone else you should meet." Willow laid her hand on his shoulder and guided him toward the door as Oz took up the rear. Gabriel tried not to notice the nervous quiver in her fingers.

>The door to the briefing room was an old, heavy portal, made entirely out of dull, dark metal. Willow paused before it and looked to her husband.

>"Do you think we should knock first?" she asked uneasily.

>Oz raised a bushy gray eyebrow, "You think he'll be any less surprised?"

>"No," she agreed, "I guess you're right."

>Gabriel reached for the door handle. Oz quickly stepped in front of him.

>"Under the circumstances, maybe I should go in first." he suggested.

>"Who is this guy?" Gabriel frowned, "And why do you both seem so afraid of him?"

>"I wouldn't exactly say afraid. More like careful." Oz quirked a half smirk, "Sometimes even good people fly off the handle under the right circumstances."

>Oz pushed the heavy door open and led the other two inside. The room was dark, lit for the moment only by a wan overhead lamp. A shadowed figure leaned over a large oval table in the center of the room, a wired listening device held up to his ear. The figure didn't even look up as they entered.

>"Hey, Angel." Oz greeted, carefully. Gabriel frowned at the obvious caution in his friend's voice.

>"Oz," Angel still didn't look up, "Just who I wanted to see. Come here and listen to these transmissions we intercepted. See if your hearing can pick up anything mine can't."

>"I don't think this is the best time." Oz declined, "There's someone here to see you."

>Angel finally raised his head, his face blank. Almost instantly, he noticed Gabriel and his eyes locked on the young man, narrowed with anger. Gabriel met his gaze steadily.

>The vampire looked exactly like he had in 1999. But Gabriel could see the passage of time in his eyes, he could sense the pain and suffering that had been ground into the vampire in recent years. The last time they had seen each other, Gabriel wouldn't have called him an enemy, but not exactly a friend, either. Something told him that, for Angel, the distinction was not so difficult to make anymore. Stepping out slowly from behind the table, Angel walked slowly over to him.

>"It's Gabriel." Willow pointed out, encouraged by the vampire's apparent calm.

>The blow came too quick for any of them to see. One minute Gabriel was standing, the next he was sitting on the floor holding his jaw.

>"What the hell are you doing here?!" Angel snarled, his voice strained with emotion. "You have no right!"

>Gabriel jumped to his feet, ready to retaliate. Willow took hold of Gabriel's arm, concerned, while Oz subtly slipped between the vampire and the Seventh Son.

>"Now hold on there, Angel." he held his hands up non-threateningly. "This isn't the same Gabriel we knew. Look at him. He got lost in time somehow and I think we should try to help him."

>Angel glared at the auburn-haired young man as realization slowly set in. "Help him? Why?"

>"Because he needs it." Oz looked him in the eye meaningfully, "Calm down."

>"You're right." Angel let the tension ease from his face and clasped Oz by the arm, his muscles relaxing, "Thank you." He turned to Gabriel and offered his hand. "I'm sorry."

>Gabriel warily accepted the handshake, forcing his anger under control. "What did I do to you?" he asked carefully. The ramifications of his situation were still sinking in. He hadn't even considered the thought that he might still be alive in this time period. On the bright side, it probably meant that, at some point, he would get back home.

>"It's not important." Angel shook his head dismissively, turning back to the oval table, his left eye twitching uncontrollably, "We have too many other things to worry about now to dredge up ancient history."

>Oz cocked his head, picking up an alarming note in Angel's voice. "What's up?"

>Angel sighed, rubbing his hands down his face. "There's something big going down. Fides is planning something, but I can't figure out what it is."

>"Fee-dez?" Gabriel questioned, frowning at the odd sound of the name.

>Angel fixed him with a reproachful stare at the interruption, but Oz quickly interceded.

>"After the Emperor bought the farm, his top demon henchman took over." He explained to Gabriel, "She's no crossbreed like the usual spawn we meet up with. She's a full-fledged demon, what we call a first class force. Her name is Fides and she's been running the show for over ten years now. If she's planning something, it can't be good." He turned back to Angel.

>"You want to organize a recon mission?" he suggested.

>"We may have no other choice." Angel traced his finger along a faint

line drawn on a blue print map. "There's a new data storage facility in the middle of the old skirmish zone, but we'd need a crack computer expert on the team."

>"Darlene's the best around. Did Alex report on their patrol yet? How bad was her squadron when they got in?"

>"Not too bad, " Angel considered, "They lost Martinez and Durst. Plus a few minor injuries, but not bad. It's little early to be sending them out again, though, don't you think?"

>Oz shook his head sadly, and tugged thoughtfully at his beard.

"Trust me, no one would like to see Red Squadron get some R and R more than me, but there doesn't seem to be any alternative. Who else has such a skilled and well rounded team?"

>"The mission can wait a few days." Angel stated, "Give them a chance to unwind a little. Call a meeting in an hour. You and I can work out a basic plan and figure out who else we need in on this before then. We'll make an official announcement about our new guest then."

>"Wait a minute." Gabriel raised his hand, "How am I supposed to get home?"

>Angel's eye started twitching again as Oz turned to Gabriel and smiled. "We'll see what we can do for you. But the three of us have some other things to talk over first. You can wait here for now, if you want. We'll set you up in some temporary quarters later."

>Angel and Willow walked to the door while Oz went to a case of circular disks and withdrew one. He handed it to Gabriel.

>"Gabriel," Oz regarded him gravely, "It's probably best if we keep it a secret where you really come from for now. As far as anyone else needs to know, you're just a fortunate toplander, okay? The last thing we need is a wild rumor flying around and getting everyone all worked up."

>"Even if the rumor is true?" Gabriel smirked sardonically.

>"Truth is the worst kind of rumor." Oz set a portable computer on the table before him and indicated a thin slot beneath the slightly curved view screen. "Put it in here. It has enough information to fill you in on a few of the things you'll need to know if anyone's going to believe your story."

>"I hope you're right." He answered.

>Oz turned to Angel. "Think he needs a new name to go with the identity?"

>"Too late." Gabriel informed him, slipping the shiny disk into the slot. "I already told the blonde girl my name." Immediately, a menu appeared on the view screen. At least computers don't seem to have changed too much, he thought, relieved.

>"Well, then I guess that's that." The grizzled old man chuckled lightheartedly, "If my little girl knows your name then you can bet that everyone else in the base knows it too. We'll get together and work out a believable story for you before the meeting, okay?"

>"All right." Gabriel scrolled around the computer's interface using a little analog control on the front of the machine and started quickly getting the hang of its design.

>"See you later, Gabriel." Oz rejoined his wife and Angel at the door. "We won't leave you here for long."

>"Wait, Oz." Gabriel looked up from the computer console, "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

>"Uh, yeah, sure." The old werewolf seemed a bit uncomfortable.

>Angel and Willow exited the room, leaving Gabriel and Oz alone.

>"So what do you want to talk about?" Oz asked, "You worried about keeping up appearances while you're here?"

>"No, it's not that." Gabriel answered, turning his chair to face the other man, "And it's not that I don't appreciate your help, but . . ."

>"You want to know what that thing with Angel was all about." Oz finished for him with a smirk.

>Gabriel nodded softly.

>"After Buffy was killed, he started drinking. A lot." The bearded man explained, "He's dry now, but it took a lot of work. When he sees you, he sees the past and when he sees the past, he sees her. It's not easy for him. He's not the barrel of laughs he used to be." Oz sighed, "It doesn't really help that the two of you had some . . . political differences."

>"I see." Gabriel nodded, "Was I was part of the Resistance Movement?"

>"No." Oz shook his head sadly, "You were kind of an independent until . . ."

>"What?" Gabriel regarded him seriously.

>"You died. You were killed a long time ago. That's why seeing you again has been so . . . unexpected."

>The news was upsetting to Gabriel in a removed sort of way. He had already been told about Xander and Buffy being dead. Extending the scope of that horror to include himself was not really a big step.

>"Look, Oz." The Seventh Son looked at him earnestly, "I want to thank you for trying to help me. I can see that you all have your hands full. I wish I could help."

>"Don't mention it." Oz smirked cryptically, "It's the least I-we could do. Study the disk. It's important that we get you up to speed."

>Opening the door, he paused to wave and then exited, leaving Gabriel alone to sift through a veritable mountain of data.

>Outside, Oz patted Angel's shoulder compassionately. "That wasn't as bad as I thought it would be." he smirked. "Aside from that little outburst at the beginning, you handled yourself pretty well."

>"I still don't trust him." the vampire grumbled, "Once a coward, always a coward."

>"Like you said, " Oz smiled at him, a flash of teeth through his wiry steel gray beard, "We'll just have to wait and see."

>"Why didn't you tell him?" Willow's forehead wrinkled in confusion, "You know, about . . ."

>"Because there's no need." Angel responded tersely, "I want him out of here as soon as possible. And I don't want either of you telling him, either. It will only make more problems. If you can work out a spell that will send him back, then there's no need to complicate things. Do you think you can do it?"

>Willow's face contorted cutely, despite her age, as she considered. "I've never done a tempus spell before, but I've got one in my books. It might take a while to translate it, though."

>"Good, get started on it right away. Oz and I will work out the plans for the raid." Willow rubbed her finger across her bottom lip, her brown eyes filled with worry. "Is Gabriel going to be all right? There's so much he has to get used to."

>"He'll be fine." Angel scoffed, a little bitterly, "He's taken care of himself before, I have no doubt that he can do it again."

>"I hope you're right." she whispered gravely.

>* * *

>An hour later, the leaders of eight of the ten squadrons were assembled in the briefing room, seated around the perimeter of the large oval table. Angel sat at one end of the table wearing the official uniform of his office and brooding, his eyes hidden in shadow. Oz sat next to him in his usual seat, wearing an overlong dress coat adorned with rows of medals and award ribbons. He seemed more relaxed than any of the others, amusedly watching and listening to the different leaders of the various squadrons as they muttered and surmised amongst themselves about the nature of the meeting.

>Certainly, they knew who it was about, everyone in the base had heard about the strange, young toplander that Red Squadron had brought in, but the question on their minds was why. Next to Oz, Gabriel sat deliberately still, his gaze trained absently on the center of the table. The room bristled with tension as each of the squad leaders turned his or her eyes, silent and furtive, in the young man's direction, hoping to somehow glean a small measure of understanding from his uneasy countenance.

>One in particular watched him intently. Sitting across the table, next to Angel, the black-haired gypsy reclined easily in his chair, leaning forward with his hands folded under his chin and his dark eyes narrowed in suspicion. Aside from Angel, he appeared to be the least impressed by the newcomer's presence.

>Gabriel was beginning to feel very uncomfortable, not to mention unwelcome. He couldn't wait for this to be over. Another of the squad leaders took his place at the table. Only one seat remained empty. It was obvious the meeting would not begin until it was filled.

>The heavy door flew open and slammed back against the wall and Alex rushed inside, breathless. Smiling a greeting at the assembled leaders, she slipped into the empty seat next to Gabriel and carelessly shoved her thick black hair back out of her face.

>"Hey." She greeted him, bumping her chair forward under her. It grated noisily against the floor, shattering the tense silence. Every other person in the room, Gabriel in particular, flinched at the harshness of the sound.

>"How are you?" she grinned, feigning ignorance of her faux pas.

>"Better, I think." He kept his face calm, but his eyes glittered in appreciation for the respite and a faint smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth.

>"You're late, Alexandra." Angel glared at her reproachfully.

>Impervious to all the other warning looks directed at her, she became strangely subdued under his authoritative gaze. Of all the people in the base, he was the only one who called her by her given name. She hated it.

>When she was young, her mother used to talk about how she had known Angel since before the Resistance was ever formed and how he had been one of her closest and most loyal friends. The way she had told the stories, he had seemed genuinely friendly, not the sour, hard-ass that Alex and the other squad leaders had come to know. Maybe her mother's memory had been less than accurate.

>As a child, evincing the first signs of her extraordinary perception, Alex had sensed that he and her mother had once been lovers. Before she learned that vampires were sterile, she had often

wondered if he might be her father. After all, he had been a soldier in the Resistance as long as her mother had and they had fought side by side for much of the early part of the war. She could sometimes see a mild resemblance between herself and him. They also both shared a driven dedication to the cause, to the exclusion of all else sometimes. When she had come right out and asked her mother about it, though, Buffy had been politely evasive, telling her only that her father had been killed before she was born and that they would talk about him when she was older. Only by the time Alex was older, her mother was dead, just like her father.

>"I apologize, Head Director." She offered demurely.

>"It's all right." Oz smiled, reaching over and giving her hand a squeeze with his own thick paw. "You've had a rough couple of weeks. Angel realizes that. Don't you, Angel?"

>The vampire's eyes were once again trained on Gabriel. "Let's get this meeting under way." He grumbled tersely.

>Oz smirked and shrugged helplessly to his adopted daughter.

Apparently it was the closest thing she was going to get to an apology. Angel lifted a heavy wooden cylinder in his hand and tapped it on a small metal disk on the table with a resonant thumping sound.

>"I call this council meeting to order on the fourteenth day of June, 2035." He announced, "Head Director Angel and Director Oz presiding. Are all in attendance?"

>Oz rose to his feet formally and straightened his long overcoat. "Director Willow and Academy Master Marcus forward their apologies and regretfully decline the council's invitation."

>He sat down and Angel nodded, making a perfunctory note in the official log. The announcement was just a formality. He had already known who would be in attendance and who wouldn't. Willow was busy with a task that he, himself, had assigned her and Marcus hadn't attended council since he had taken over instructing at the academy for his mother two years ago.

>"Then let's get started. I'm sure you are all aware of the successful return of Red Squadron. Two of their members, Juan Martinez and Andrew Durst were killed in the line of duty. Reparations are being arranged for their families and the duty roster has been adjusted accordingly. Director Oz will name replacements before the next briefing. Are there any objections?" Angel raised the wooden cylinder and held it, hovering over the metal disk.

>"None? Good." He allowed the cylinder to thump once. "Next order of business."

>"I'm sure you are all aware of the young man that was brought in with Red Squadron this afternoon." Oz took over, gesturing toward Gabriel who continued to sit, still and silent, "He's a toplander who got separated from his band and he'll be staying here at the base until we can make arrangements to have him transported to one of the habitation centers."

>Angel nodded slightly to himself. He and Oz had discussed what kind of story they were going to come up with to explain Gabriel's sudden appearance. They had both agreed to keep it simple. With little to make the story interesting, most people would forget about him in a matter of days.

>"His name is Gabriel . . ." Oz trailed off and looked worriedly to Angel.

>In their haste to manufacture a background for him, they had forgotten to supply him with a new last name. Rupert Giles was one of the founding members of the Resistance and the surname was well-known. Another Giles on site would certainly bring up some

unwanted questions.

>"Van Winkle." Alex supplied, "At least that's what he said when we found him." She turned to Gabriel, "That IS your name, isn't it?"

>At a loss for words, Gabriel simply nodded. Not his first choice for last names, but at least the fortunate misunderstanding had covered up their mistake.

>"Yes, you're right." Oz took command of the table again with a wry smirk, "His name is Gabriel Van Winkle."

>Angel watched as the different squad leaders each looked to Gabriel then to one another in curiosity and disbelief. It would be safest for everyone involved to have him sent on his way as soon as possible, he decided arbitrarily. Personally, he couldn't have wanted it more. The Human Resistance was the embodiment of everything that his dear Buffy had stood for and, now, sitting less than five feet away from him was the epitome of its downfall. It was hard being this close to him without doing anything about it. He caught himself glaring at the young man again and forced himself to look away.

>THIS boy was innocent, he reminded himself. He had no idea what he would one day become. The vampire toyed idly with the idea of reaching across the table and snapping his neck in front of the entire council. It would certainly change things in the present, but he wasn't so sure about the past. No, killing him probably wouldn't change the past, he reasoned. And if it would, he probably couldn't bring himself to do it, even if it would bring her back. Besides, who knew what other changes could occur. Time paradoxes gave him a headache.

>"Angel," a low, gravelly voice asked softly, "You all right?"

>He snapped out of his self-indulgent mental wanderings and looked up. Oz gave his arm a squeeze and, seeing that he was aware again, smiled. Angel smiled back briefly in thanks then turned his attention back to the meeting.

>"Are there any comments?" he held the wooden cylinder up again, just inches over the metal disk. "No? Good."

>"Next item, then." he was glad to get that short episode behind him. Gabriel's appearance unnerved him, but lying to his soldiers made him feel worse. He would be counting the seconds until the irritating young man was finally gone again for good.

>"Director Oz and myself have assembled plans for a proposed recon mission set to launch in four days." he announced, "It will require the cooperation of both Red and Gold Squadrons. We will understand completely if there is anyone, particularly from Red Squad, who wishes to abstain."

>Alex and the dark-haired gypsy each nodded their acceptance.

>"I don't think anyone from my team will abstain." Alex declared proudly, "They're all good, tough people."

>"Gold squadron is always ready." Cole asserted, equally proud.

>"Excellent." Angel sifted through a small stack of papers before him. "Everyone will be briefed shortly before the mission. Until then, relax and enjoy yourselves." He raised the cylinder again, "Meeting adjourned?"

>Oz reached out and stayed the vampire's hand. "I'd like to close this meeting if you don't mind, Angel."

>The burly, gray haired man stood and cleared his throat uneasily, accepting the wooden cylinder from Angel. "I've already decided on one of the replacements for Red Squadron." He turned to the

auburn-haired young man, "Gabriel, you said you wanted to help earlier. Are you ready to back that up?"

>Gabriel's mouth sagged open, too stunned to answer. But he found he didn't have to, as the dark-haired gypsy jumped to his feet, his fists planted knuckle down on the tabletop. At the head of the table Angel was equally shocked and outraged.

>"You can't be serious!" Cole shouted angrily, "He's a toplander! He won't last more than five minutes in the field. There are plenty of good recruits at the Academy who are ready for a squad assignment. What about McGuinness? Or Reese?"

>Oz's expression remained patient but unimpressed and, realizing who he was talking to, Cole quickly reined in his temper. "With all due respect, Director," he forced his hands to unclench, "He has no idea of our battle procedures or any of our techniques. Darlene said he wasn't even carrying a gun when they found him."

>Oz regarded him steadily. "Then I leave it up to you to teach him, Commander. You have four days to get him up to speed. Use the time wisely, you may be surprised."

>"He's not even part of my squad!" Cole complained, "Why should I be the one training him?"

>"Because you're the one who doubts his ability." Oz answered, plainly. He wasn't entirely sure of his motivation for doing this, but he would see it through. "If, in four days, you still think he's unfit, for whatever reason, then I will replace him with a soldier of your choosing. No questions asked." Cole might not like the idea, but Oz trusted him to give an honest appraisal of Gabriel's ability.

>Cole sank back into his seat, still not pleased, but not ready to question a superior's decision again.

>"Does anyone else have an objection?" Oz made a cursory glance across the faces of the ten squad leaders, but none of them spoke up. Alex smiled and winked at her adoptive father. Oz then turned his eyes in Angel's direction, expecting at least token resistance from the embittered vampire. "Do you object, Head Director?"

>Angel sat very still, his hard eyes glaring holes through his fellow Director. Oz had been a close friend for decades and he knew, without a doubt, how Angel felt about Gabriel. The vampire couldn't believe what he had just done. Take it up in private, he cautioned himself silently, there's no use in starting an argument in front of the whole council, "Four days." He allowed, his mouth turned down grimly. "If he's still here, that is."

>Gabriel watched the exchange, both spoken and silent, and wondered again what his future self had done to become such a tense point for Angel, and why no one seemed willing to tell him about it. Silently, he made a mental note to do a little nosing around and find out the exact details for himself.

>Director Oz turned and regarded him seriously. "And what about you, Toplander Gabriel?" he asked with a wink. "Do you accept?"

>Gabriel swallowed nervously and let his eyes fall to the floor. The only thing on his mind up until now had been getting home, but now that it seemed like a less immediate possibility, he understood that his time and energy would probably be better spent concentrating on the present. Worrying about the past was what had gotten him into this situation in the first place.

>"I'm not a soldier." he hedged, feeling the combined gazes of the entire council bearing down on him.

>"Already noted and addressed." Oz pressed, "Are you in or out?"

>"I may not be a soldier, " he looked up into Oz's gray bearded face,

"but I'll do my best to become one, I promise."

>A series of appreciative nods and murmurs ran through the squad leaders and Alex cheered openly. The only ones who seemed displeased with his answer were Angel and Cole.

>"That's everything then." Oz thumped the cylinder down on the metal disk shortly. "Meeting adjourned."

>The squad leaders rose from their seats and, pausing for a moment to shake Gabriel's hand and congratulate him, filed out of the room. Gabriel hovered, lost for a moment, not sure whether to stay or go, feeling welcome with neither option. Alex grabbed him by the arm excitedly and started for the door.

>"I can't believe this!" she grinned, "Oz assigned you to my squadron and you've only been here for one day! You must have really made a good impression on him. I TOLD him you were a good guy."

>"Yeah," Gabriel followed her passively, his attention still focused on the only two who remained behind. He had been as surprised as anyone upon hearing Oz's request. He wondered what the older man was up to.

>* * *

>"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" Angel demanded, his voice held tightly under control, "Is there some reason that you feel the need to do this to me?" He leaned heavily over the council table, his knuckles white with anger.

>Oz raised his hands defensively. "I knew this wasn't going to sit well with you, Old Friend, and I apologize, but we can't condemn him for a crime he hasn't even committed yet."

>"So you just give him a chance to do it all over again?" Angel threw his arms in the air in outrage, and turned his back to Oz, "I just don't understand this. How could you assign him to her squadron?"

>"I don't understand it, either, really." Oz admitted softly, "But it's something I had to do."

>"I don't like it, Oz." the vampire kept facing away from his friend, but began to calm, "I don't want him near her, not after what he did to Buffy, but you already know that and there's no point in repeating it."

>"Look at it this way," the old grizzled werewolf patted Angel consolingly on the shoulder, "This is too much of a coincidence to just be an accident. He MUST be here for a reason. What if this is his chance to make up for the past? You of all people know that one evil act does not necessarily condemn a man."

>"No," Angel's shoulders slumped. "I guess you're right. But, I still don't trust him."

>"I have a good feeling about him, Angel. You won't have to worry about any trouble." he said with a reassuring smile. I hope, he added silently.

>* * *

>"Come on. Now that you're part of my squad, we have to get you outfitted," Alex suggested, leading Gabriel down a long hallway away from the briefing room.

>They came upon a small office with a prominent front desk and a large metal cage along the back. Inside the cage were stacks upon stacks of coded boxes and folded black uniforms. A young man, maybe twenty years old, sat behind the counter, reading a book. He was naturally pale with sad looking dark blue eyes and chestnut brown hair that hung in careless sprigs down across the lenses of his small wireframe glasses.

>Alex leaned against the front desk and rapped her knuckles sharply on the hard wood. The boy snapped to attention, whipping off his

reading glasses and dropping his book, and raised his hand in a panicked salute.

>"Commander Summers!" he exclaimed, his back ramrod straight, "I didn't hear you come in."

>"At ease, Byron." She smirked, "I'm not here for inspection, just to get my friend here outfitted."

>The dark-haired young man coughed uncomfortably and cleared his throat. "Sure. I mean, absolutely. Just step inside."

>He hastily swung a section of the counter aside and ushered them both into the back.

>"He joining Red Squadron?" he asked Alex, ignoring Gabriel entirely, "I heard you lost a couple while you were out on patrol."

>"Yeah." She answered, her green eyes studying the codes scribbled on the sides of the many boxes. "Martinez and Durst. Both of them took a lot of demons with them before they went, though. They died good deaths."

>Good deaths?, Gabriel wondered to himself, Is there any such thing?

>"I'll have to size you up." Byron said to Gabriel, "If you'll just get up on the stool there."

>He slipped a long, worn, measuring tape out of his pocket and held it up to the light. "You look like a thirty-two light. Maybe a thirty-four. What do you think, Alex?"

>"Sure." She sniffed, uninterested, "Sounds fine to me. Toss me the keys. I want to dig around in back a little."

>As Gabriel mounted the wooden stool, Byron paused.

>"You know that's not allowed, Alex." He pointed out, "Only one of the Directors or myself can go back there. I could get in real trouble if you got caught."

>"Oh, come on, Byron." She smiled, "I've been back there a dozen times before and you never, once, got in trouble. Give me the keys."

>Small red circles arose on Byron's cheeks and he grudgingly surrendered the small keyring to her.

>"If anyone comes along, you have to get out of there. Fast." He instructed her, "I mean it."

>"Sure thing, Byron." She slipped the correct keycard through the slot and snapped the door open. "You know I'd never get you in trouble."

>Gabriel watched as she carelessly hauled a box down off the stacks and, pulling the top off it, began nosing around inside. Byron's cheeks reddened further. The boy had a crush on her, Gabriel realized, while she thought of him more like a younger brother or some other dear relation. She was a beautiful girl and he wondered how many other young men around the base had to suffer a similar fate. Byron crouched and skillfully used the tape to measure first the length of his foot and then the width, marking the results down on a small notepad.

>"I don't think I've ever seen you around before. What are you? An explosives expert like Martinez?" he asked conversationally as he obtained his measurements with sharp movements and keen pencil strokes.

>"What?" Gabriel asked dumbly.

>"You know, your specialty?" Byron didn't bother to look up at him, engrossed in his work, "What is it?"

>"Oh, well I guess I don't really have one." Gabriel answered, "I like to do all kinds of things."

>"You don't have a specialty? Everyone has a specialty." Byron paused and eyed him skeptically. "Hey Alex, what end of the Academy did this

guy fall out of?" Behind the cage wall, Alex stumbled over a tall narrow box with a vehement curse, knocking it to the floor.

>"He never went to the Academy, By. He's a toplander." She called through the steel mesh of the cage, "There's nothing but junk back here. Where do you hide the good stuff?"

>Byron gawked at Gabriel, his jaw hanging wide open. "THIS is the toplander you brought in? How did he get assigned to a squadron?"

>"Oz's idea." She explained, "So where IS all the good gear?"

>"This is unbelievable. I thought you looked a bit out of place. Arms up please." He waited for Gabriel to spread his arms and whipped the measuring tape around his chest, "Munitions have been moved downstairs. I think Director Angel got wind of your unauthorized 'borrowings'."

>"What a load of Devil piss!" she spat, shoving another box with her foot. "I'm a squad commander. I SHOULD have access to the best guns in the base." She walked out of the caged area and slammed the door irritably behind her.

>"Maybe you should ask Marcus for a little trial-wear." The young man remarked wryly, "Word is he's working on something new. Something that even Darlene doesn't know about. I think he's the only person alive who can lock her out of his data systems."

>"Forget about it. Dar's the best there is." she declared with a proud smile, "She could crack his protocols just like anyone else's. It just happens to be that, as her big brother, he can get away with a lot more physical threatening. She stays away from his files by choice. I would too, if I were her. So, are you done with him yet?"

>Byron frowned and shrugged, tucking his tape back into his pocket. Digging around in a long red box, he withdrew a neatly folded uniform and a pair of hardy, metal capped boots, all streaked with the bright crimson markings of Red Squadron.

>"Here, " he said, tossing the bundle to Gabriel who caught it easily, "Just like I thought, thirty-two light. Just had to make sure, that's all."

>"Your quarters are in F-14." He dropped a small plastic keycard into one of Gabriel's new boots. "You'll probably have to wait for your weapons though."

>"Thanks Byron." Alex smiled at the pale young man, patting him affectionately on the shoulder, and waved, then took Gabriel by the arm, "I'll see you later. Sorry about the mess."

>Byron watched the pair leave, a wistful look in his eyes, and waved half-heartedly.

>"Bye."

>* * *

>Alex lead Gabriel across a metal catwalk, overlooking a wide chamber with three huge cylinders that almost reached to the ceiling. A number of people dressed in white lab coats stood at a collection of tables, each diligently working on a piece of mechanical equipment.

>Gabriel gripped the railing of the catwalk and looked over the edge, "What is this place?"

>"Tech-land." She answered, pointing down at the three huge vats, "The tanks are full of holy water. See that valve down there?"

>He nodded, following her finger to a complicated apparatus attached to one end of the three tanks. It was fitted with numerous coiling tubes and etched with mystical runes.

>"The pump runs ground water through a filter and purifies it, then it's blessed as it passes through that special valve. When you go through the stuff as fast as we do, it's always good to have a lot on hand."

>Gabriel sighed in disbelief. Automated holy water. The idea seemed sacrilegious. This reality just kept getting stranger.

>Down on the main floor, a group of young men and women in white lab coats crowded around a rectangular table.

>"What are they doing?" he squinted, attempting to look over one of the workers' shoulders.

>"This where they research the new weaponry." Alex continued walking along the catwalk, "Marcus designs most of it, but the tech-heads do a lot of the work."

>Gabriel followed her out of the chamber and into another cylindrical corridor, "What's down there?"

>At the end of a short hallway, he could see a small room with three human-sized bronze statues standing atop a dais.

>"It's a memorial." Alex answered shortly, "That's where they put my mother's statue after she died."

>"Oh." Gabriel regretted mentioning it, "I didn't know."

>"No biggie." She assured him, "It's not like I ever cry about it. A statue's just a statue as far as I'm concerned."

>She was quick to fall back on her tough girl front, he noted. Would Buffy have turned out the same way if she had been raised in this hell?

>They walked a little farther until they rounded a bend in the corridor.

>"The firing range is over this way." Alex indicated a wide archway which lead into a well-lit open area. Distantly, Gabriel could hear the muted pops of gunfire.

>"Here, I'll drop your uniform off at your quarters for you." She took his uniform and boots from him and handed him back his keycard, "You better hurry. Cole's probably already there waiting for you."

>Gabriel sighed uneasily and nodded, slipping the keycard into his pocket.

>"What?" Alex asked, "You're not worried about Cole are you? He may be a Terakan, but he's got a level head, not to mention that he's one of the best gunners in the base. Oz was right in sending you to him. You'll be fine."

>"No." he answered, "It's not that. I'm just feeling a little overwhelmed by all this, that's all."

>"Trust me, " she smiled, "Being a soldier has GOT to be better than where you used to live. Besides, how different can it be?"

>"You have no idea." He smirked ironically to himself as he waved and headed down the corridor toward the firing range, "I'll see you later."

>His comment was not lost on her, and she frowned in thought, watching him as he went.

>The firing range consisted of a long series of cubicles arranged along one side of the room, with human shaped target dummies set at varying distances away from them on the other side. Gabriel wandered into the room warily amid a steady tattoo of dull pops.

>Cole stepped out of one of the cubicles, comfortably holding a sleek looking black handgun, unlike anything Gabriel had ever seen before, in one hand.

>"Finally, you're here." The dark-haired gypsy eyed him darkly. "Let's get down to business."

>He indicated one of the closer cubicles. Gabriel stepped inside with

Cole right beside him.

>"That is a target." Cole pointed toward the other side of the room at a torso shaped dummy set about halfway down. "This is a gun." He flipped the pistol around and held it out to Gabriel for inspection, "Specifically, it's a PL-112. The PL stands for Polarized Light. We're only using practice ammo right now, but, normally it fires standard photon charged rounds."

>"What?" Gabriel raised his eyebrows, lost.

>"Photon charged." Cole repeated impatiently, "The bullets are laced with light particles and blessed with holy water for an added kick against demon opponents. Have you ever even fired a gun before?"

>"No." he lied. The guns he had fired had been nothing compared to the PL-112, so he didn't really think of it as an untruth.

>"It's really simple." the dark haired man wrapped his fingers around the butt of the pistol and raised it to arms length, aiming down the lane for the far-off target. Curling his index finger around the trigger, he squeezed and there was a sharp bang and a small flash of blue-white light. A neat hole exploded in the direct center of the target dummy's chest. "There, " he said, flipping the gun around and handing it to Gabriel, "You try it."

>Gabriel accepted the weapon with both hands. It was surprisingly light and felt awkward in his grip. Mimicking Cole's movement, he raised the gun and aimed, squeezing the trigger. A shot exploded from the weapon's muzzle and Gabriel jumped, sending the bullet flying widely off the mark.

>Cole grabbed the gun to steady it, laughing reproachfully.

>"Hold it still this time!" he barked, shaking his head critically. "And don't blink your eyes. You'll lose the target that way." He positioned the gun at shoulder height and pressed Gabriel's free hand to his wrist for support. "Now keep your eye on the target . . . and just squeeze the trigger."

>Gabriel took his time on his second attempt, carefully sighting down the length of the gun. Aiming, he fired, his eyes steadily focused and his arm only bucking enough to absorb the recoil. Cole arched an eyebrow at the hole that was now punched through the target's shoulder.

>"Not bad." he allowed grudgingly.

>"Just lucky, I guess." Gabriel shrugged, smiling slightly with pride.

>"The Order has a saying that a warrior makes his own luck. Do that again." Cole commanded, pressing a button and sliding the target farther back, almost half way to the opposite wall "In the chest this time."

>Gabriel obeyed, blasting a small hole in the dummy's upper chest, not far from where Cole had hit it. He was quickly adapting to the feel of the gun in his hand and how it reacted when he fired. Not so different at all from the guns he had learned to use years ago.

>"Again." The gypsy demanded quickly, setting the target all the way back. Gabriel concentrated, squinting his eyes and clenching the gun tightly in his hand. He focused on the dummy's forehead, a point that was almost too small to see at this distance, and squeezed the trigger.

>"I can't believe it." Cole's amazement began to push through his resentment, as he noted the neat hole that had appeared in the dummy's forehead. "You're a natural marksman. Let's try you on something else."

>They went through a range of different weapons. High powered, mechanized crossbows, rifles, shotguns and an array of specialized handguns. After a few practice shots, Gabriel took to each of them with ease, baffling Cole. The squad leader continued to test Gabriel's limits for hours, never failing to be surprised.

>"I guess that's enough for today." he realized, relenting at last.

>"Good." Gabriel yawned, "I'm bushed."

>"Don't sleep too soundly." Cole advised, "I set you up for hand-to-hand training in the morning."

>"And who might be in charge of that, " he asked sardonically, "as if I didn't already know?"

>"Good guess," Cole grinned, "Dar's the best melee fighter we've got, other than Alex. And I think she likes you. When she gets her hands on you, you better be wearing something . . . secure."

>Gabriel groaned as Cole continued to chuckle.

>"You know what, Gabriel?" the dark haired man regarded him soberly.

>"Hm?"

>"You're not such a bad guy, after all. I'm sorry I gave you a hard time earlier. It's just that Alex is too damn stubborn sometimes. She can't always see when she could be making a mistake."

>"Don't worry about it." Gabriel shrugged it off, "It's good that you look out for her. You really like her, don't you?"

>"Is it that obvious?" he asked sheepishly.

>"Not to everyone, but I'm pretty quick at picking up on things."

>"I've noticed." Cole smirked, "What do you think I should do?"

>"Be good to her and let her have her space. She's stubborn, but, give her time and she'll figure things out for herself." Gabriel's eyes hazed as his mind traveled back to what, to him, had only been a few months ago. Alex's stubbornness reminded him of her mother. His memory was still very cloudy, but he could remember her face perfectly. "I knew a girl like her once. Women like that don't come along very often, maybe once in a lifetime. Sometimes you don't even realize it until she's gone."

>Cole looked at him sympathetically. "You sound like you've got some regrets." he clapped his hand to Gabriel's shoulder in a comradely manner, "You'll have to tell me about it sometime."

>"Tell you what. If I can make it through these next four days, you can buy me a drink and I'll be happy to share a few stories." Gabriel stretched, holding out his hand to the dark eyed gypsy, "Agreed?"

>"Agreed." Cole shook his hand and nodded.

>* * *

>Gabriel proceeded sleepily along the barracks hallways, following the directions Alex had given him earlier. F-11. . .F-12. . .F-13. . .F-14. He pulled the keycard out of his pocket and slipped it through the slot. With a short beep and a muted hiss, the door slid open on hydraulic runners. He stepped inside and let the door close behind him.

>The room was dark and it took him a moment to find the light switch. Locating an inset sphere on the wall, he slowly rolled it upwards and watched as a dull ambient light turned on and gradually increased.

>The chamber was small and octagonal, with a box shaped dresser that doubled as a desk and a low flat palette that served as a bed. Alex had dropped off the box containing his uniform as she had promised,

leaving it at the foot of his bed. Shoving it onto the floor, he crawled under the gray sheets. It wasn't much, but he didn't care at this point. After the day he had had, he needed a good, long sleep. Desperately.

>He laid his head back and closed his eyes, pulling the sheets up over his head. Sleep did not come right away, however. His mind churned with the events of the day. In the span of less than twenty four hours, his whole world had changed, literally. Everyone he had known in his former life was either dead or completely different. He had more in common with their children now than them. His mind continued to drift and he thought of Alex. Alexandra Summers. She resembled her mother in many ways, but he wondered who her father could have been. Angel was not capable of fathering children, so who, then? Her dark hair and name pointed him in an unthought of direction. Xander? Oz had said that Xander and Buffy had been very close. Had they . . .? No, Buffy had never thought of him as anything more than a friend. But war had a way of stirring up people's emotions. God knew everything else in this time period was stranger than fiction.

>The world was a hellish nightmare, the human race was fighting a losing battle with a neverending army of demons, Oz and Willow had children older than himself, Buffy and Xander were both dead and Angel harbored a violent grudge against him.

>In his own time, Gabriel had felt a peculiar kinship with the tortured vampire, a kinship that may have one day developed into friendship. But things had changed since then. His future self had done something to sour Angel toward him. Gabriel knew it wasn't his fault, but he couldn't help but feel responsible for what he might someday do. He could only imagine what it could have been.

>* * *

>Angel paced back and forth before the three bronze statues, a nearly empty bottle of home-brewed liquor dangling in his hand. Just a sip, he had told himself, just to take the edge off. He tried to forget that he hadn't touched a drink in almost ten years. But the edge wouldn't ease with just one sip, so one became many and then he had ended up here. This place had become like a church to him. It wasn't a real church, of course, but certainly as sacred to him. Moreso even, since God seemed to have turned his back on the world when the skies became swallowed in fire.

>He stopped and looked up at the faces of the three statues thoughtfully. These were his source of spiritual strength now. Giles' statue reminded him to be patient and wise, as well as dedicated to his responsibilities. Next to that, in the middle, Xander's nobly cast visage represented perseverance and the uncanny luck of foolish optimism. Last and certainly most important, the wellspring of his courage and the thing which gave him the strength to carry on his life from day to day. Buffy's bronze face seemed to look down on him with beatific awareness. He could almost see her again sometimes, even hear her voice. It was all in his imagination, he knew. But he didn't care. Imagination was all he really had left of her now.

>"He's here again." He told the statues with a voice that was heavy with trepidation, "Somehow, he's back and I don't know what to do about it."

>The three statues listened in silence.

>"It's all so strange." He continued morosely, "Everyone is so accepting of him. Oz is actually happy to see him. Am I the only one who sees the danger? Am I the only one who cares?"

>Climbing up onto the dais, he stood on the edge and regarded each statue at eye level.

>"Xander, " he spoke to the center statue as if it were a living, breathing version of his old friend, "without you none of us would be here. You saw us through the long, hard beginning of this road and continue to inspire us. I promise I won't let him tear it all apart again."

>He took a sideways step and came face to face with Giles' statue.

>"And Giles, I know if you were still here, you would be defending him. The way you always did." He bowed his head slowly, "But you weren't here when it happened. You couldn't understand what he did. Even now, I'm not even sure if I understand it myself."

>Shuffling unsteadily, he teetered for an instant and latched his arms around the neck of Buffy's statue, hanging drowsily from it. Pulling himself back to a standing position, he pressed his forehead against the cold metal.

>"And you, " he whispered, tears gathering in the back of his throat, "You, you, you, I miss you. I miss you more than I miss the stars in the sky, more than the sun that no one gets to see anymore. But Alexandra's here. She's a good girl. She reminds me so much of you. You'd be so glad to see how well Oz and Willow have taken care of her."

>Salty tears welled up in the corners of his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. He pressed his fingertips against Buffy's bronze features, holding precariously to the statue to steady himself.

>"I'm trying to be forgiving." He choked, raising the bottle to his lips and sucking back another mouthful of harsh, burning alcohol, "I want to be strong, like you were, but it's just too hard this time."

>Pressing his cheek against her unyielding shoulder, he released his hold with one arm and let his hand with the bottle swing wide.

>"I hope you'll understand. " he whispered low and tight-voiced, "I'll never be able to forgive the man who killed you."

>* * *

>Gabriel stood before the open Hellmouth, his arms and legs outstretched, trying to hold back a flood of demons. They pushed relentlessly forward, slowly gaining ground, and soon they would be through.

>Someone walked into his peripheral. It was Buffy, older than he remembered her and horribly burned, too badly to still be alive. She watched him calmly with her blackened visage, not making a sound. There was another figure beside her, unnoticed until now. It was his father, Peter, and he was burned as badly as Buffy was.

>The demons pushed harder and Gabriel was forced to take a step back.

>"Help me!" he cried, straining against the steadily increasing force of the tide of demons.

>As one, Buffy and Peter shook their heads in negation.

>"This is your problem." Their cracked lips hissed the words. They stood, still as statues, their eyes staring accusingly at him.

>"I don't understand. How is this my fault?" Gabriel fell back another step.

>The scorched pair continued to watch him impassively.

>"Answer me!" Gabriel demanded, his hands slipping and losing his hold on the demonic mass. The darkness flooded forward, engulfing him like a tidal wave.

>"NNN000000!!!" he jolted upright in bed, breathing heavily and bathed in chill sweat. A small red light blinked on and off in a regular rhythm near where his head had lain. It was an alarm. He was supposed to get up early for . . .something. It took him a moment to remember where he was. He felt a little sick when he finally did.

>Had the dream been prophetic? Or was it just that, a dream. Although genetically predisposed to such psychic sensitivity, he had never had a prophetic dream before. He wished he'd had the foresight to ask Buffy what they were like. Now, he might never get the chance.

>A sharp rapping sounded at his door and he jumped nervously.

>"Gabriel, are you in there?" a light feminine voice called from the other side of the door.

>It was Darlene, he realized distantly. He rose with a yawn and a groan. Rubbing his eyes, he touched the keypad that controlled his door. It slid open, revealing a chipper, peppy Darlene. She stood smiling, wearing a bright yellow jumpsuit adorned with strips of crimson ribbon and various mismatched crests. She fidgeted excitedly on the spot, her hands tangled together in front of her.

>"What happened to you?" she gawped and poked him playfully. "You're still in the same clothes as yesterday!"

>He looked down at himself sleepily.

>"Yeah," he breathed around a yawn, stretching, "I was up late."

>"RREEAALLY?" she slipped into the room, eyes alight with curiosity. "You weren't with Alex, were you?"

>"No." he shook his head, "Weapons training with Cole." He squinted at her and pressed his hand against his head. "Why are you here again?"

>"I'm in charge of your hand-to-hand training, cutie." She beamed, "But it looks like you forgot."

>"I didn't forget." He grumbled, reaching over and snapping off the blinking red alarm light, "I just slept in a little, that's all."

>"Great," she clapped her hands together, "Get up. Get a shower and come on. Time's a wastin'!"

>She herded him through a narrow metal door into a small tube shaped chamber and closed it behind him. To his left, there was a square, hinged door on the wall and on his right, a cylindrical knob marked with a single, red notch and a bowl containing three bars of soap.

>"Throw your uniform in the chute." Darlene shouted through the door, "Then pull out the knob and turn it left for hot and right for cold!"

>Dully, he pulled off his uniform and, balling it up, stuffed it into the small, sealed chute. He tugged on the knob and screamed immediately as a cascade of lukewarm water poured steadily down his back. Outside, he could hear Darlene's mischievous giggle. Sourly, he grabbed up a white bar of soap and began to wash.

>* * *

>Twenty-five minutes later, Gabriel stood in the center of what looked like an octagonal boxing ring, dressed in a sturdy training outfit that reminded him of the gi he used to wear in his master's dojo when he had trained in Japan. The walls were festooned with training gear and apparatus, all of it for practical use. Young men and women, academy students, he surmised, wandered in and out of the room at a regular rate. As he let his mind drift, Darlene paced back

and forth along the outer edge of the ring dutifully explaining the rules of engagement.

>"You pretty well just have to stay a little shy of the major nerve centers and cripple points and everything else is just standard sparring." She finished quickly, "Gabriel, are you listening to me?"

>"What?" he snapped out of his daze, "Oh, yeah. Don't cripple you. Got it."

>"Cripple ME?" she grinned incredulously, "Sweetie, these rules are for your benefit. You won't be able to touch me unless I want you to." She easily hopped over the top rope and sidled up to him. "Which we can discuss a little later."

>"Let's just get started, shall we?" he looked down at her seriously.

>"Sure." She agreed with a shrug, falling into an easy fighting stance, "Don't forget that you can beg for quarter if you need it."

>He mirrored her stance and held his hands up loose and ready.

>Wasting no time, she dove forward. He tried to sidestep, but she was too quick and agile. Gripping him around the waste, she flipped him over her hip and slammed him to the mat with surprising strength. Kneeling over him, she raised her tiny fist and snapped it downward, stopping just short of his nose.

>"That was a hip toss." She explained with a chuckle, casually rising and walking back to lean against the ropes. Hovering near the doorways, a few stray students paused curiously to see how badly Darlene would trounce the unfortunate toplander.

>He sat up and rose into his fighting stance, beckoning for her to come on again. She obliged, and in only a few moments more than it had taken the first time, he was flat on his back with her fist pressed into his throat.

>"This is getting fun. You men always think you're going to take me because I'm a girl." She giggled, shaking her head ruefully, and retook her place on the ropes. "Stupid."

>Three more times, she dropped him and pulled a strike to one of his vitals, taking only slightly longer each time. The students nodded amongst themselves in admiration.

>"Don't make this TOO easy, Gabriel." She chided, "I might get bored with you. Then I'll have to find a new playmate."

>Frustrated, Gabriel slammed the flat of his hand against the mat and bounced to his feet. He didn't like this. In her arrogance, she was purposely trying to humiliate him to prove that she was the better fighter. And he WAS making it too easy for her, he realized. She was right, he had let her small size and slight frame lull him into a false sense of confidence, let his own arrogance blind him to the facts of the situation.

>So far, she had defeated him using her advantage in speed and leverage, turning his greater size and weight against him. Silently, he decided it was time to press his own advantages. His reach far outdistanced hers and he was stronger too. If he could keep her at a distance, he could rob her of the ability to use her grappling skill against him.

>In Japan, Gabriel's sensei had taught him to use his particular vision to read his opponents and act accordingly. If an opponent were to telegraph an attack, it would show first in the eyes. Locking his gaze to Darlene's, he raised his hands and advanced.

>"Still haven't had enough, huh?" she grinned confidently, basking in the attention of the slowly growing audience. "All right. Come here so I can throw you down again."

>He didn't answer her, instead choosing to strike out with his fists. Darlene quickly ducked and slipped inside his reach. Just as he had anticipated. Driving upward with a knee, he caught her hard in the stomach and, hooking his foot around behind her ankle, flipped her leg out from under her and dropped her roughly onto her back. A chorus of impressed murmurs rippled through the gathering students and a few even clapped.

>He leaned down, until his face was only inches away from hers. "Let me know if you want to be given quarter." He smiled.

>Growling, she smashed her forehead into the bridge of his nose and threw him back. He rolled and sprang to his feet, ignoring the pain, and readied his fists.

>"Okay, kid gloves are off, now." Dar informed him, her confident grin firmly back in place. "There's no WAY I'm letting a toplander get away with something like that. Time for you to feel some serious pain."

>She stalked him more cautiously this time, leading with lightning fast jabs and swift kicks. Each time she attacked, she tried to get in on him to execute a throw. He danced around her moves skillfully doing his best to keep her at arm's length.

>"I haven't forgiven you for that punch when you first found me." He reminded her, throwing a fast right at her head.

>"That was nothing compared to what I'm going to do to you today." She slapped the punch aside, spinning around into a savage backfist.

>The blow caught him across the face and he stumbled, bouncing back against the ropes. Whipping his arms from side to side, he desperately blocked several follow-up attacks, allowing only one weakened strike through. It caught him on the nose, however, and he felt the familiar warmth of blood gathering in the back of his throat.

>"Face it Gabriel," she advised cheerfully, "You can't beat me. Except maybe for Alex, I'm the best in the base."

>She jumped forward into a kick, narrowly missing his lower ribs. She drew up short as he feinted with a kick of his own, switching tactics at the last second and stomping down hard on her foot, pinning it to the mat.

>"Not anymore." His fist swooped up under her chin and smashed into her delicate jaw.

>Darlene's whole body went rigid with the strain of the blow and she fell back onto the mat with a squeak and a groan, her foot still pinned under Gabriel's. The spectators gasped in awe as he crouched down and helped her sit up. Her blue eyes were a little glassy, and she looked at him, stunned.

>"You okay?" he asked softly, concern showing in his eyes.

>"That . . . was a nice . . . hit." She congratulated him haltingly, rotating her neck gingerly, "I totally didn't see it coming."

>Carefully, he slipped his hands under her arms and lifted her easily to her feet, "Come on, let's walk you around a little until you get your feet back under you again."

>"My guts feel like they're in all the wrong places." She groaned, "Help me to the showers. I think I'm going to throw up."

>He draped her arm over his shoulder and set her on her feet. Walking her carefully, he headed in the direction of the shower room. Behind him, the gathered students continued to stare in awe.

>* * *

>The four days of testing passed quickly and Gabriel more than met

all the requirements. On the morning of the fifth day, he had been inducted into Red Squadron and given the rank of Private. Red and Gold Squadrons had been summoned to assemble at the main sub-train loading area. Thirty-two soldiers, none of them older than twenty-four, and all armed to the teeth. Gabriel had been given his choice of weapons shortly before the assembly. The young man had opted for a pair of PL-122 pistols and a long, serrated knife, which he tucked into the top of his boot.

>While most of the soldiers were being seen off by family members and friends, Gabriel stood patiently waiting, alone. Any mission could be a soldier's last and most prepared themselves as if it would be. Alex and Darlene said their goodbyes to Oz and moved on to his wife. Willow hugged Darlene first, then Alex, smiling a tearful farewell to both girls. Then she looked to Gabriel and an even deeper sadness settled in her eyes.

>"Good bye Gabriel." She whispered, her voice strained with emotion.

>"Thank you, Willow." He smiled kindly at the middle aged woman.

>The members of Gold Squadron loaded onto the first sub-train car. Cole paused in the doorway, looking alternately between Gabriel and Alex. Gabriel caught his attention and nodded meaningfully toward Alex. The Gold Squad commander smirked and favored him with a short wave before joining his soldiers inside.

>"Well, I guess we're off." Alex announced as her troops slowly filed into the second sub-train. "Bye, Nanna, Oz. We'll be good, honest."

>Darlene, Gabriel and Alex were the last of Red Squadron to board the transport car. Willow waved, a tear in her eye, and pressed her hand against her mouth. Beside her, Oz wrapped a thick arm around her shoulders and waved good-bye with a reassuring smile.

>Standing back, away from the assembly, Angel lurked, cloaked in the shadow of a dark corridor with his hands jammed deep into his pockets. His eyes narrowed as he watched Gabriel enter the sub-train. "You'd better do it right this time." he murmured softly.

>* * *

>"Come on, Darlene." Alex urged, calling her friend by her full name. "We don't have much time."

>"Hey, what are you expecting, a miracle?" Dar shot back from her precarious position beneath the computer console. "A mere mortal like myself needs time. Or would you rather see this thing blow up in our faces before we download byte one?"

>"Just hurry it up. This place is making me nervous."

>They had slipped into the enemy installation without a hitch. Cole and his squad had taken up guard positions along the corridor that would serve as their escape route while Red Squadron had gone on ahead and infiltrated the main data repository. The demon architecture was chaotic and convoluted with odd shaped tunnels and warped passages. Alex hated these places. To her, they were wholly unnatural, a reflection of the dark and twisted minds of the demons who built them.

>Gabriel stood close to a small service door, something akin to a living valve, identical in appearance to the one Cole's team was watching on the opposite end of the room. He could see thick fluids pumping through the wall, driven by some dark, hidden heart, and a fine map work of veins and nerves. He had been told that demons didn't build with inorganic materials, but he had never imagined this.

>"Disgusting, isn't it?" Alex remarked, noting his expression.

"That's what they do with their dead. They grow them into structures like this. I'll be glad when we blow it up."

>He shuddered slightly, nodding in agreement to her sentiment.

>"There, got it!" Darlene tugged on her pliers with a dull snap and a tiny spit of sparks, a short length of severed wire trapped between the tips. Sliding out from under the console, she quickly hopped into the operator's chair and began tapping keys wildly. After slipping a shiny circular disk into the drive, she began transferring files. "It should just be a few minutes now."

>"How are we doing for time, McGuinness?" Alex turned to the other new member of the squad, a boy who Gabriel estimated to be no older than sixteen.

>"Four minutes, fifty-one seconds." McGuinness answered, fingering a small digital timepiece nervously.

>"Damn it!" Alex swore, "Get a move on, Dar. We have to get out of here."

>"I'm trying. It's this damn machine!" Darlene complained, "Probably hasn't seen a tech since it was installed. Just once, I'd like to see a demon that's not a total technological simpleton."

>The door next to Gabriel gave a shudder and quietly split into three panels which slid back into the wall. Alex caught the movement out of the corner of her eye and whipped out her shotgun.

>"Down!" she shouted to Gabriel, lining up her shot and pulling the trigger in the span of half a second.

>Gabriel dodged an instant before a leathery, blue-skinned demon entered through the door and raised its talons to strike. An instant after that, it's face exploded in a flash of blue-white light.

>Gabriel straightened, looking stunned at the headless corpse as it collapsed, twitching, to the floor.

>"Thanks." he said in a low, breathless voice.

>Alex walked past him and inspected the wall where her bullet had ricocheted and opened a small hole. Gabriel noted with disgust that the hole was bleeding.

>"Damn it!" she hissed between clenched teeth, "Cavanaugh, contact Gold Squadron, tell them to get out. Now. We'll be right behind them."

>"What's going on?" Gabriel watched in confusion as she bounded for the door, her shotgun drawn and under her arm.

>"I cut the wall." she explained, prying open the door and peering cautiously down the hallway. "These buildings feel pain. They know we're here now."

>Cavanaugh removed his earpiece and looked to his leader apologetically. "I have Gold Squadron on the box, Commander. They say they aren't going anywhere until we're done."

>"Give me that!" she growled, hastily snatching the communications device out of his hands and holding the receiver to her ear. "You listen here, Cole! I am the ranking officer on this mission and I say you and your team bug out. NOW!" She spat in rage and threw the equipment to the ground, "Damn that Terakan! He's pretending to lose the transmission."

>She strode over to the computer console and placed her hand on Darlene's shoulder.

>"Come on, Dar." she instructed resignedly, "We've got to clear out."

>"Just one more minute." The petite blond begged, "There's something big here. I'm almost in."

>"We can't afford the time, Dar." Alex shook her head, "I said --"

>The rest of her sentence was lost in the tumult of a score of muffled gunshots from the other side of the escape door. Gold Squadron was under attack. Alex, her shotgun readied, leaped for the door, gesturing for Gabriel to follow. Turning halfway around to face him, she stopped in mid-motion and her eyes flew wide. With a flurry pounding footsteps and blood-curdling battle cries, almost a dozen purple-skinned demons leaped over Gabriel and into the room through the open service door. Scrunching her face into a grimace, Alex raised her shotgun, firing, and took one of them through the stomach in mid-air. Diving into a roll, she fired again blindly into the mass. As one, the creatures landed, and bounded away in all directions.

>All around her, bullets whizzed and demons screamed in rage and pain. Something hard struck her in the back of the head, throwing her face first onto the floor. As Alex rose to her knees, a tall, sinewy demon with shiny, black barbs along its forearms and calves stepped arrogantly into the room and fixed her with a deadly glare. It was well over eight feet tall and leanly muscled, with tiny inter-linked blue-black plates covering every inch of its flesh, like armor. A pair of whip-like tentacles sprouted from the backs of its shoulders, swaying gracefully like tails of cats. The creature's face was almost elegant by demon standards, with narrow, cat-like eyes and high, jutting cheekbones. More thin, shiny tentacles hung from its head like hair, each one encased in the same tiny armored plates. If pressed to venture a guess, Alex would have classified it as female. The demon's face was twisted with hatred and disdain as it looked down at her with burning, blood red eyes.

>"You've all just made the biggest mistake of your lives." The demon's voice was harsh and whispering and carried a disturbing, resonant echo as if it were two voices overlaid.

>"Oh, God." Alex whispered, her skin going cold with horror, "It's her. Fides the Terrible."

>The monstrosity advanced on Alex like a juggernaut, her supple, armored legs pounding taloned feet into the floor as it came, stray bullets deflecting, unnoticed, off her hide. Alex leveled her shotgun and fired. Through a cloud of smoke, she could see that the demoness had not even slowed. She fired again and again to no effect, emptying her entire load of shells, the last at point blank range. Diving desperately, she narrowly avoided being crushed by the demoness' charge. Rolling to her feet, she came up next to Darlene.

>"I got it!" the small blonde gleefully held up the disk in her hand.

>"Great, let's go! We're in way over our heads." Alex grabbed her by the arm and started to run, but Darlene hesitated.

>"I have to scramble the data tracks or they'll know what we were here for." Slipping a fresh shell into her shotgun, Alex offhandedly blasted a hole clean through the console.

>"Happy, now?" she smirked, pulling her friend along with her.

>The door they had been planning to use for their escape burst open and Cole and his squad backed into the chamber, retreating and firing their weapons down the hallway. An emaciated, four armed demon leaped forward heedlessly and grabbed onto a young scar-faced Terakan. Cole reacted purely on instinct, firing two quick shots from his pistol. The first bullet grazed the demon's shoulder, knocking it aside enough so that the second bullet caught it full in the chin. Nodding gravely to his scarred teammate, he limped further into the room, his soldiers in tight, disciplined formation around him.

>Their escape route blocked, Alex and Darlene made a break for the other side of the room, but were cut off as Fides stepped directly

into their path

>"You're all dead!" Fides snarled gleefully, intercepting a Red Squadron soldier with the slithering smoothness of a serpent and hoisting her into the air by the head. The young woman screamed as Fides chuckled darkly and tightened her two handed grip, squeezing the life out of her.

>"What do we do now?!" Dar cried in panic, averting her eyes and fleeing with Alex as the demon bit into the dead woman's shoulder with a grinding crunch.

>"There has to be another way out." Alex coolly scanned the room. Eight demons lay dead at their feet, but ten more had poured in through the open service door in the meantime. Only the valiant and tenacious efforts of Cole and his Gold Squadron were keeping them from being completely overrun.

>She reached into her pack and pulled out a head sized lump of explosive, eyeing the outer wall speculatively. They had only brought the one and it had been intended for destroying the whole structure once they had escaped, too big to just blow a hole through a wall.

>Gabriel skipped backward, unloading a full clip from each of his handguns into the body of an attacking demon.

>"There's too many of them!" he shouted over the tumult of combat. "How are we supposed to get out?!"

>"Explosive's too big to put a hole in the wall." Alex hefted the mass of wires and short green tubes, "We'd blow ourselves to pieces!"

>Gabriel eyed her shrewdly and looked over her shoulder as the towering Fides cornered two more of their teammates. He slipped his pistols into his belt and, grabbing her pack in one hand and the explosive device in the other, raced toward the giant creature.

>He whistled shrilly and waved his arms to get her attention. "Hey, ugly!" he shouted, "You want a real fight?"

>Fides paused, peering slowly over her shoulder.

>"You've got to be kidding me." she chuckled derisively.

>The demon watched him, puzzled for a moment, then, grinning with a naggingly familiar bloodlust, whirled about and surged forward. Gabriel backed away unsteadily, his face filled with trepidation.

>"What the hell does he think he's doing?" Alex thumbed a fresh load of shells into her shotgun and took aim. She fired three shots in quick succession, but they bounced harmlessly off the creature's thick carapace amid an explosion of sparks.

>Cole noticed what was going on and fired also, scoring on the demon general's armored hide with no effect.

>Fides dipped her head, snorting steam through tiny, slitted nostrils as she stormed forward.

>Gabriel pressed his back against the outer wall, trapped, his eyes locked on the serpentine beast that was quickly bearing down on him.

>"Come on, you useless piece of garbage!" he challenged, waving Alex's pack in its face like a flag.

>"Nowhere left to run, little mortal!" Fides exulted, "Now it's time for you to die."

>The demon lunged forward, her strong, sinewy arms spread wide. Gabriel dove between her feet, slapping the bomb against its midsection as he went, and whipped around, springing into a backwards run and firing a hail of bullets into the demoness' back. Alex, Darlene and Cole also opened fire on the creature. Unbalanced from the multiple impacts, Fides fell forward, pinning the explosive

between her body and the wall. Gabriel dove to the floor, face first, and threw his hands over his head. Instinctively, the other squad members did likewise, ducking for cover wherever they could find it. There was a muffled crump and a flash of white light and the entire building shook as the demoness was launched, howling, back through the air with the force of a missile. Her long, wiry form hurtled across the room, bellowing in outrage, flattening a half-dozen of its dark kin and smashing clean through the opposite wall. A cool breeze poured into the chamber as bloody ichor ran freely from the edges of a ragged, smoking hole in the outer wall where the bomb had gone off. Everyone in the room, demon and human alike, was stunned into silence.

>"That was amazing!" Darlene marveled with a short cough, unplugging her fingers from her ears.

>"Congratulate me later." Gabriel smiled through the smoke, "Let's just get out of here. Fast."

>Alex bent to scoop up the wounded body of one of the two Fides had backed into the corner and ran for the opening, pausing only long enough to fire a bullet into the back of a retreating demon. Gold Squadron and the rest of Alex's team streamed out behind her.

>Fides' outraged shriek followed them out into the open air. Gabriel hovered by the makeshift doorway and looked back uneasily. There was something chillingly familiar about the serpentine demon, a half-buried memory that struggled to resurface. The huge creature sat up, slow but apparently unhurt, her eyes bursting into flame as she glared at him through the smoke and debris.

>"YOU." she raised a scaly arm and pointed at Gabriel with a taloned finger, an unmistakable command to her demon followers. "KILL THEM!!"

>"Gabriel, come on!" Darlene grabbed him by the arm and pulled.

>He stumbled absently after her, his attention fastened on Fides as she rose, staggering, to her feet. As the first of the demoness' stunned servants began to take up pursuit, Gabriel tore his eyes away and broke into a headlong run.

>* * *

>The fleeing squadrons crested a steep hill and hastily rushed down the other side.

>"I think we can stop running now." Alex slowed down to a walk and leaned against the gnarled bark of a twisted, leafless tree, "Looks like we lost them."

>"No," Cole disagreed, limping, his breathing labored, "We keep going until we get to the sub-train tube. Who knows how long we have before they send out scouts to find us."

>"Look, Cole," Alex looked to him seriously, "We're all run down. You look like you're ready to collapse. And don't forget, my people only got in four days ago. I think we can afford a short rest. We'll set up a small perimeter and let the medics give everyone a once-over. What do you say?"

>"Maybe you're right." He answered tiredly, pressing his back to the twisted tree and sliding slowly to sit on the ground. "Everyone, at ease for now. Lasseter, Jones and Silverberg, I want you three to go out about a quarter mile and set up a triangular watch perimeter. At the first sign of any kind of pursuit, we're getting the hell out of here."

>The three Gold Squadron soldiers obeyed wordlessly, readying their weapons and heading out in three divergent directions.

>Cole looked a little pale in the face, and he was holding a wound in his side and another along his leg. Gabriel was surprised that he had

managed to run as far as he did unassisted. He was even more surprised that the man still had the presence of mind to be giving orders.

>Alex motioned to her team medic. "Ostby, take a look at him." She pointed to Cole, "Then go through our own team starting with Cavanaugh. He took a bit of a bruising back there."

>Gabriel sat on the hard earth and tried to relax. Tried was the operative word. He could still hear Fides' terrible voice echoing in his ears. Ever since they had escaped, he had had a foreboding feeling deep in his stomach.

>"What do you think is in these files?" Darlene wondered, plunking down across from him, the data disk in her hand.

>"Must be pretty important stuff, considering Fides' appearance." Cole reasoned as Ostby busily wrapped his thigh with bandages, "I don't think anyone's reported meeting her face to face since the twenties."

>"Yeah, that thing totally gave me the wig." Alex began disassembling her shotgun with practiced efficiency and carefully cleaning it out with a soft, dirty cloth. "I nailed it dead-bang with an entire clip and it didn't even slow down."

>She pulled her helmet off her head and sucked air wetly through her teeth in dismay, dropping it to the sparse grass. A large crack ran almost halfway up the back of it, nearly splitting the helmet in two.

>"Damn it!" she swore, "I love this helmet!"

>"Be glad that wasn't your head." Cole chuckled, "That's what helmets are for."

>Darlene slowly flipped the data disk end over end with the fingers of one hand, munching on a ration bar with the other, "Maybe this has something to do with the start of the war. You know, the reason behind the whole thing."

>Alex and Cole looked to each other and rolled their eyes in exasperation.

>"There IS no reason behind the war, Dar." Alex argued, sighting down the detached barrel of her shotgun. "Demons kill. That's what they do. They have no other motivation."

>"I'm telling you, the invasion was no accident. They had this planned long before the millenium." Darlene insisted, stuffing the last half of the ration bar into her mouth.

>"Oh no, not your crazy conspiracy theory again?" Alex shook her head, smiling patronizingly, while rubbing carefully at a small burr in her gun's loading mechanism with a tiny file.

>"Conspiracy theory?" Gabriel asked curiously.

>"Forget about it, Gabriel." Cole took a long drink from a metal cup as Ostby finished tending to his side, "You don't want to know, trust me. Darlene has these crazy ideas that the war started with a planned invasion."

>"It's not crazy!" Darlene slapped him smartly across the back of the head, sending him forward, choking with laughter, "If you ever saw the things that I have on the World Network, you'd believe me. There are secret records out there, left over from the old era and, if you know what you are doing, you can access them easy enough. Dozens of eye witness proofs of organized demon activity before the turn of the millennium."

>She sat down across from Gabriel excitedly, her hands a blur of motion as she got deeper into her story. "You see there were these two special agents, a man and a woman, and they traveled around documenting the demon plot. They kept video records as proof. I'm telling you, the truth is out there."

>"Oh, come on, Dar!" Alex giggled, slipping the strap of her

now-reassembled shotgun over her shoulder. "If there was so much proof of the demons, then why wasn't the Resistance formed before 2002?"

>"That's just it." The blonde leapt to her feet fervently, "The government was trying to cover everything up, to keep the citizens in the dark, you know, so they could make a deal with the demons or something. I think they even went so far as to put some of them in positions of political power as part of the deal."

>"Darlene!" Alex squealed, holding her ribs, "Stop it, I can't breathe anymore."

>Cole slumped over in a fit of laughter, pressing his hand gingerly to his side.

>"It's true!" Darlene shook her fist in frustration, "The Emperor was just a small time Mayor in some backwater town before he started the war."

>"The Emperor was human, then, Dar." Alex shook her head patronizingly, "He became a demon after he completed an Ascension ritual."

>"What about this other guy I heard about? They made him king of a country called Irack, like, a hundred years ago. They called him Sodom Insane. Tell me that doesn't scream 'demon' at you."

>"I believe you, Darlene." Gabriel patted her shoulder comfortingly.

>"See." Darlene stuck her tongue out at the other two, "At least somebody here has a brain."

>Alex sat up, wiping tears of laughter from the corners of her eyes, while Darlene dug out another ration bar and threw it at Cole in annoyance. The Terakan caught it with a deft hand and smiled his thanks mockingly to her.

>"All right, everybody, " Alex shouted loud enough for the soldiers of both troops to hear, "ten minutes to catch your breath then we haul out to the sub-train tube."

>Gabriel stood up and strolled slowly down the far side of the hill, his heart finally starting to calm. He was almost starting to get used to the constant, faint stink of ash and sulfur. Compared to the stuffiness of the base, the air was fresh out here. He squatted in the sparse grass and folded his arms over his knees. Looking out over the wasted landscape, he wondered what it might once have looked like.

>Off in the distance, he could make out what might have been a riverbed and, beyond that the worn down walls of a shallow valley. It might almost have been nice to look at if one could forget the hellfire in the sky and the way the huge tracks of charred and broken rock along the ground resembled ragged scars. God, he wanted to go home.

>A pair of soft footsteps approached him slowly from behind. He felt a vague tingling sensation crawl up his spine and he didn't have to turn around to know who it was.

>"Alex." He greeted her softly without turning around.

>"Hey." She sat down next to him, "Whatcha lookin' at?"

>"Nothing." He replied distantly, staring into the distance, "Just looking. Thinking about home."

>"You miss the surface." She deduced, "It must be hard for you, living underground now."

>"What? Uh, yeah." He had almost forgotten who he was supposed to be, "It's like a whole different world." In a way, what he had said was true. It wasn't a lie, at least.

>"Yeah, well, you'll get used to it soon." She smirked, "You just gotta roll with the punches and deal."

>Just gotta roll with the punches and deal, the words echoed in his mind, freeing another wave of memories. Someone else had said that to him once. He had been sitting on a hill, staring out at a distant highway, thinking about home, Scotland this time. Buffy had found him, despite that fact that he had wanted to be alone, and she had changed his mind about leaving Sunnydale in a matter of minutes. Her charm and strength of will had enamoured him from that very instant, a fact that had almost been lost in the tumult of the disaster that was to follow. He could see the same traits in her daughter, a familiarity that made him suddenly miss her.

>Alex was laying back on her elbows staring out at the horizon with her shotgun balanced across her stomach, habitually close to her hands. Her eyes wandered upward and her face lit with wonder.

>"Wow." She gaped, "Look at THAT."

>Overhead, the eternal murk that was the sky had thinned and, in a small area, clear night sky and a scattering of stars were visible.

>Alex pulled a hand-sized set of binoculars out of her pack, setting them to her eyes and peering into the sky.

>"This is really cool." she marveled at the small celestial miracle. "Here, take a look."

>She offered the binoculars to Gabriel, her face beaming. Gabriel accepted them, shrugging half-heartedly. It was only a small patch, but from what he had seen of this world, perhaps it was the best they could get.

>"Sometimes I forget that there's a real sky behind all that hellsmog." she continued, "The stars look like little jewels. Especially that bright red one."

>"That's not a star." Gabriel commented, viewing it through the binoculars, "It's a planet."

>"What?" Alex frowned, confused.

>"It's a planet." he repeated absently, handing her binoculars back, "Venus, specifically."

>"How do you know these things?"

>"When I was just a boy, my Father used to show me the stars all the time. They sort of remind me of him." His voice tightened with remembered guilt.

>She cocked her head and fixed him with a sidelong look. "You must have grown up far from here. This is only the second time I've ever seen the stars. You make it sound like you saw them every night."

>"Uh, no." he avoided the question clumsily, "I just made sure I saw them every chance I got, that's all."

>"So what happened to your Dad?" she fingered a small round stone for a moment before flicking it down the hillside.

>"He's . . . gone." He answered slowly, the pain still fresh in his memory, "He died two months ago." Again, he was able to tell the truth while still maintaining his cover.

>"My Dad's dead, too. Sorry." She said the words with an easiness that he found a little disturbing. Hearing about the death of a loved one was commonplace in this world, he realized, and she had probably become inured to it over time. "I guess that's how you ended up here, huh?"

>"You could say that, yeah." he smiled bittersweetly to himself. He looked at her carefully, a knot of agitation turning in his stomach, "Do you remember much about your father?"

>Alex shrugged, leaning back on her elbows, "Not really. I know that he was killed just before I was born. And I know that Mom didn't really take it well. She was always good to me, taught me to be the

soldier I am. But she cried a lot. She used to cry for hours when she thought no one was around. Then some trouble would come up and she'd put on what she called 'her game face' and everything would seem all right."

>Killed before she was born . . .Xander had been assassinated around that time. Perhaps once the gangly young man had given up trying to win Buffy's heart and concentrated on something bigger, he had finally caught her attention.

>"You sound like you were close." He said, noting how similar she seemed to her mother now, as she reclined comfortably in the dry grass.

>"We were." She smiled wistfully, "My Mom was the best. No matter how busy she got with the council, she still had time for me. I didn't really need my Dad as long as she was around, but I still wish I could have known him."

>He found himself thinking again about the last time he had seen Buffy and how he had left Sunnydale without even saying goodbye to her. He had been so overwhelmed with loss and guilt then, he wouldn't allow himself to even think of her. It seemed so trivial now, considering the state of the world. He was pleased to see that despite trying conditions, Buffy had been able to stay close to her daughter.

>"It must have really hurt you when she was killed." He said, feeling sorry for her.

>She saw the sentiment in his eyes and frowned.

>"Yeah, well it kinda sucked, sure," she shrugged, unconcerned, "but, like I said, I don't cry."

>"Never?" he smirked incredulously, "That hardly seems healthy."

>"Healthy or not, that's the way it is." She squinted at him, studying his face, "You remind me of someone when you smile like that. I don't know what it is, but I've sensed something familiar about you ever since we found you on the outskirts."

>"I have the Second Sight." He turned his face away from her self-consciously, "This 'Sense' that you have sounds a lot like it. Maybe that's what you're seeing."

>"Mom used to tell me that I inherited some of her Slayer intuition and that, because of it, we would always be aware of one another even without all our other senses. I get the same feeling from you."

>Gabriel shook his head and shrugged helplessly. "There are a lot of things in this world that can't be explained. I was born with powers very much like the Slayer's. The similar energies can interact sometimes."

>When he had met Buffy for the first time, he had experienced a similar feeling. Any time they had been near one another, each had experienced an unmistakable recognition of the other's power.

>"I don't know." She scrutinized him more closely. "You're different from the rest of us. All this seems so new to you."

>He turned his gaze uneasily to the sky, avoiding her eyes. She suspected something, certainly, and he had no idea how much longer he could keep his promise to Oz and continue to lie to her. How would she react if he told her he was from the past, that he had known her mother when she was younger than Alex was now.

>"Hey there, you two. Check out the funky sky." Darlene interrupted to Gabriel's utter relief, approaching from behind them with her usual carefree grin firmly in place, "What's with the private meeting? Or did I just answer my own question?"

>"Nothing going on here that you have to worry about interrupting."

Alex assured her, hopping to her feet, "I'll go see if Cole is ready and then we can get moving."

>Again, Alex covered a brief moment of vulnerability with gruffness. Leaving Gabriel and Darlene behind, she loped down the hillside and started barking orders to the rest of her squadron.

>Watching her for a moment, Gabriel felt a nagging question resurfaced within him, something he had felt the need to know since he had arrived in this tortured time. It was time to stop asking questions and get the answers himself. Alone with Darlene, he turned his back to the others and leaned his head close to her ear.

>"Darlene? " he asked in a low voice, "I need to ask you a favor."

>Favoring him with a flash of bright teeth and a coquettish giggle, she reached up and hooked her hands around the back of his neck.

"Anything you want, Private," she grinned, her eyes lambent and hungry looking, "but I think we should wait until we get back to base where we can have some privacy."

>Blinking in surprise and his cheeks flushing scarlet, he tugged her hands apart and held them away from his body. "Actually, I was hoping you could help me with a little research I've been wanting to do. Private research."

>Her glittering blue eyes lit up with hunger of a different sort.

"You want me to hack somebody's files?" she inquired, intrigue obvious in her voice.

>"Maybe." He answered, careful to keep his voice from being heard.

"We'll talk about it later. Meet me in my room after we get back."

>"Now there's an offer I wouldn't refuse." She chuckled, winking broadly as she walked around him and rejoined the two squadrons.

>* * *

>Angel sat back in his curved leather chair and watched the wall of surveillance screens grimly. He saw how Red Squadron had returned through the main sub train tube only a few minutes ago. One of their members had been missing, probably dead, and a few of them nursed minor injuries. Their faces had been bright, however, which boded well for the success of their mission. But HE was still with them. Distantly, Angel had hoped that the demons would have gotten lucky and relieved him of the young man's vexing presence.

>There was a timid knock on the door of the briefing room.

>"Come in." he called, turning in his chair sharply to face the doorway.

>The metal portal opened with a soft gasp and a worn and dirty young man stepped carefully into the room. He was wearing a newly broken in Red Squadron uniform.

>"Uh, Director. I have the information that was retrieved on the mission." He held out a small, shiny disk between trembling fingers. "Commander Summers asked me to tell you that she will be in with her full report before the day is out."

>Angel's left eye twitched unconsciously. Commander Summers. The words brought back painful memories for an instant.

>"Come in, please." Angel walked over and accepted the disk.

"McGuinness, isn't it? How did your first assignment with your new squadron go?"

>"Good, I guess, Sir." McGuinness answered as Angel turned and began thumbing through a small holder filled with similar disks. "It was a lot different from the Academy simulations, that's for sure, but I think I did all right. Not as good as Private Van Winkle, though."

Everything happened so fast. I don't know how he did it."

>Angel paused in his sorting, his back turned to the boy. It took him an instant to realize the boy was talking about Gabriel.

>"Did what?" he asked evenly.

>"He saved the whole troop, Sir." McGuinness marveled, "We were trapped inside the data storage building with this huge demon. Gabriel rushed it like it was nothing. The thing must have been ten feet tall. Bullets couldn't hurt it, so he blew it up with the demolition explosive. I thought we were all going to be dead, but he pulled us out of there like a pro."

>"Really." Angel commented darkly, his left eye twitching wildly, "Thank you, Private. That will be all."

>McGuinness grew wary of Angel's darkening mood and exited with only a short salute. Angel eased back down into his chair and closed his eyes, steepling his hands before him. It was happening again. He could see it already. The events of twenty years ago were reoccurring, only with a new generation this time. Gabriel's appearance had screamed danger at him from the very first moment Angel had seen him. Now he was more convinced than ever. As soon as he was finished scanning the new data disk, he would make a point to check in with Willow and see how she was doing on translating the spell to send Gabriel back home. This time, things would be different.

>* * *

>Fides reclined darkly on a throne made of bone and leathery flesh. The whip-like appendages that were attached to her shoulders twitched fitfully in agitation. Her lip curled angrily as she slowly scraped the tip of a razor sharp talon up along her armored navel. Although she was undamaged, the scorch marks would remain for a long time. The wound to her pride would last far longer.

>"I want him dead." She growled petulantly, "I want to drink his blood and crunch his bones between my teeth."

>She leaned over to regard her conversation companion, a dirty, bedraggled girl of twenty years or so. She was scarred horribly, her face marked by years of torment, and her hair hung in lank patches from her skull. Her arms were bound over her head and melded into the fleshy wall. Below her, the girl's feet were similarly encased. The same dark fluids which sustained the life of the Tower sustained her as well, flowing endlessly through her circulatory system, polluting both mind and body. She had been that way for years, suffering endless torture, yet being denied the peace of death.

>Fides reached out with one of her whips and nudged the girl's chin up.

>"Are you listening to me?" the demoness asked with a soft chuckle.

>The captive girl stared, unseeing, with blank, bloodshot eyes, one of which had gone completely white.

>"Good." Fides seemed satisfied, "You weren't around the first time, so I'll fill you in a little. I should have killed him, but I thought it would be more fun just to break him a little. Like we did with you. I guess I just didn't break him enough."

>The girl groaned slightly and a thin line of drool ran down her chin.

>"Now don't get all excited." The demon general cautioned, "I'll get to the good part soon. You see, there's no doubt that it's him. I'd never mistake that sanctimonious look in his eyes. But he's young again, younger than you are, and somehow he's got his spirit back."

>The girl responded with a choked gurgle and Fides chuckled again.

>"You're right," Fides nodded thoughtfully, "he COULD be a problem. But he could be a lot of fun, too. I liked hurting him and I'm going to like it again, but first I think we can make use of him."

>The girl made a low animal-like whine and her head lolled to one side.

>"How, you ask? I'll explain." Fides stood up and stretched languidly, the covering of tiny, interlocking scales creaking with the strain, "He's the Seventh Son of a Seventh Son. I know him, I can feel him, I can smell him. If they've taken him to their base, it's the biggest mistake they've ever made. It seems kind of ironic that I found another means to destroy them just as I'm about to complete my first plan. When it rains, it pours, I guess. Still, it can't hurt to be thorough."

>Fides laughed triumphantly, but stopped short when she realized that her prisoner was not paying attention. The demoness sauntered gracefully over to her tortured captive and leaned in so that they were face to face. She traced the tip of a talon down over the girl's scarred cheek, drawing a line of blackish-red blood in its wake. The entrapped girl didn't seem to notice.

>"You're getting boring." Fides observed absently, "I never should have ripped your tongue out, although you DID have it coming. I think you need a friend. Maybe I'll put Gabriel in the wall next to you. Would you like that? A little company for you to moan with?"

>The girl grunted harshly and then slumped in her fleshy encasement.

>"Oh, I know, I know." Fides patted the girl's cheek gently, then turned away, opening a large valve-like door with a wave of her hand, "But don't worry. It will all be over soon. And you'll have the distinction of being the last Slayer there ever was."

>The demoness broke into a gale of cruel laughter and sauntered through the valve-like door. As Fides receded into the distance, the zombie-like girl shook and moaned piteously, a long, mournful sound that shuddered through her broken body and echoed hauntingly in the high-ceilinged chamber.

>* * *

>Gabriel paced back and forth across his quarters agitatedly. Darlene had arrived at his door soon after they had returned from the mission at the data repository and he had immediately hurried her inside.

>"What do you think? Can you do it?" Gabriel asked the small blonde.

>Darlene ran a slim finger over the top of a small monitor that was mounted on the top of the desk in the back corner of his room and smiled.

>"Piece of cake." She answered, "What I don't understand is why you want to get in there? There's nothing in that database but archived reports and maybe a few old personal logs."

>"Let's just say it's important to me."

>"All right," she shrugged, pulling a small metal chair over and seating herself before the blocky monitor. "I'll have to take your word for it, I guess. Just a few backdoor passwords, an encryption blocker and . . . whala! There you go. You now have access to every file contained in data stand one-two-two-seven."

>She hopped to her feet and presented the now-empty chair to him with a majestic flourish.

>"I was kinda hoping you had something a little more challenging in mind." She sighed, "But I guess I can't have everything. Just make

sure you shut the terminal off when you're done, or else someone might track the connection back here. Not that anyone ever bothers to check, especially in that dusty old storage drive."

>"Thanks, Darlene." He pressed his lips to her forehead, "I really appreciate this."

>"Yeah, well, you can PROVE it to me later." She blustered, heading for the door, "Hope you find what you're looking for."

>"So do I." He said, sinking into the chair and listening to the door hiss closed behind her.

>He tapped the keys nervously, afraid he might get caught. Who knew what sort of punishment existed in this harsh time? The interface was not difficult to manage and it did not take him long to find what he was looking for. A small cache of data lit up under the highlight of the terminal's selection bar. GILES, GABRIEL, it read in plain green typeface. He kept the data cache's icon highlighted, but hesitated to open it. It felt like he was about to unearth his own grave.

>Pressing the key, he waited anxiously for the window to open and the cache's contents to be revealed. A rectangular window opened, filling half the screen. Unfortunately, it was empty. Someone had gotten here before him. Disappointment weighing heavily on his mind, he sank back in the chair. Now what could he do?

>Acting on gut instinct alone, he searched through the other data caches for another collection of files. The data was well organized and he found it within seconds. SUMMERS, BUFFY A., it read. Selecting it, he opened it and found a tremendously long list of dated text files. Apparently, these were her personal logs, the digital equivalent of a journal.

>His heart pounded in his chest. These were her private thoughts and, whether he wanted to admit it or not, this was an invasion of her privacy. It couldn't be helped, though. This was the only other option he could see. He had to know what had happened. Choosing a file at random, he tapped one of the console buttons and it opened into its own separate window.

>MARCH 17, 2009
THE RESULTS CAME IN THIS MORNING AND HE DID IT! XANDER HARRIS ACTUALLY MADE THE SENATE. HE'S PROBABLY THE YOUNGEST MEMBER ON RECORD. THINGS ARE GOING TO BE A LOT EASIER NOW. WITH HIM TAKING HIS MESSAGE NATIONALLY, MAYBE SUPPORT FOR THE RESISTANCE WILL ACTUALLY PICK UP FOR A CHANGE.

>
He already knew about Xander's appointment to the senate, that was old news. He needed something more recent. Closing the entry down, he scrolled through the series of postings, scanning for anything of interest and selected another randomly.

>
APRIL 22, 2010

>XANDER CONTINUES TO BE THE LIGHT OF HOPE THAT GUIDES US. HE FINALLY GOT THROUGH THE NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE ORDER OF TERAKA TODAY AND THEY'VE AGREED TO JOIN US. WITH A GROUP OF FIGHTERS AS DETERMINED AND TALENTED AS THE ORDER, WE STAND A FAR BETTER CHANCE OF WINNING THIS WAR.

>That explained how the Order had gotten involved with the war, but it was not what he was looking for. Unsatisfied, he skipped ahead through a long portion of the list and selected an entry.

>NOVEMBER 16, 2012
THINGS WITH THE ORDER ARE GETTING WORSE.

XANDER GRANTED THEM A SEAT ON THE COUNCIL HOPING THEY WOULD BE MORE LIKELY TO FOLLOW COMMANDS IF THEY FELT THEY HAD A FAIR SAY. THEY'RE STILL DOING THINGS THEIR OWN WAY AND ITS HAVING A DEVASTATING EFFECT ON THEM. THEIR NUMBERS MUST HAVE BEEN CUT DOWN TO HALF BY NOW. EVERY TIME ONE OF THEM GETS KILLED, TWO MORE HAVE TO GO ON A VENGEANCE TRIP AND END UP DYING, TOO. THIS CAN'T KEEP HAPPENING.

>
From what he knew of the Order's penchant for singlemindedness, this was not much of a surprise. And it was still no good. At this rate, it could take all day to find what he was looking for. He didn't have that kind of time.

>
JANUARY 4, 2013

>I CAN'T BELIEVE WHAT HAPPENED TODAY. XANDER CALLED FROM THE WASHINGTON OFFICE. SOMEONE CAME IN THIS MORNING CLAIMING TO BE GILES NEPHEW. I DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TO ASK WHICH ONE. THEY DON'T HAVE A CONFIRMATION YET BUT XANDER SAYS HE LOOKS GENUINE. MY HEART JUMPED INTO MY THROAT WHEN I FIRST HEARD. I WONDER WHERE HE'S BEEN ALL THIS TIME. THIS COULD CHANGE A LOT OF THINGS AROUND HERE.

>He sat back in his chair and blew out a long breath to steady his nerves. This was it. Finally, he would find the answers he needed. Selecting a new entry a little farther down the list, he opened it.

>JULY 11, 2013
WE CLEANED OUT ANOTHER NEST YESTERDAY. THE BATTLE WAS PRETTY TOUGH AND IF IT WASN'T FOR GABRIEL, WE MIGHT NOT HAVE DONE IT. I CONTINUE TO BE AMAZED AT THE LEVEL OF SKILL AND BRAVERY HE DISPLAYS. THE NEWS REPORTS LOVE HIM. HE'S BECOME LIKE A CELEBRITY AROUND THE BARRACKS. HE'S STILL LOOKING AT ME IN THAT WAY, THE WAY HE USED TO BACK WHEN WE WERE KIDS. AFTER THE FIGHT WE TOOK THE SUB-TRAIN BACK TO BASE TOGETHER AND HE ASKED ME OUT BUT I SAID NO. I WONDER IF THAT WAS A MISTAKE. IT'S BEEN SO LONG SINCE I'VE HAD THE TIME, LET ALONE THE INTEREST, TO GO OUT WITH SOMEONE. NOW THAT ANGEL'S TAKING OVER MORE RESPONSIBILITY ON THE COUNCIL, THEY DON'T NEED ME TWENTY-FOUR/SEVEN LIKE THEY USED TO. I MIGHT TAKE OUR LOCAL HERO UP ON HIS OFFER AFTER ALL.

>
So his suspicion about Buffy and Xander had been wrong. Fourteen years after Gabriel had first met her in Sunnydale and his attraction for the Slayer had apparently not faded. A distant image of her face flashing in his mind, he didn't find it hard to believe. Frowning in thought, he moved on to another entry.

>
JULY 20, 2013

>WE'VE BEEN POSTED CLOSER TO THE FRONT. THE NEWS REPORTS ARE BROADCASTING XANDER'S SPEECHES AROUND THE CLOCK. THE RESISTANCE HAS NEVER ENJOYED SO MUCH SUPPORT. GABRIEL INSISTED ON HAVING OUR DATE, ALTHOUGH HE PREFERRED TO CALL IT 'REACQUAINTANCE TIME'. WE HAVEN'T SEEN EACH OTHER IN SO MANY YEARS, IT SEEMS STRANGE TO BE SO AT EASE AROUND HIM. THINKING BACK, THOUGH, I GUESS I REALLY SHOULDN'T BE SURPRISED THAT THINGS ARE GOING SO WELL. WE'VE ALWAYS HAD A LOT IN COMMON. I HAVE TO ADMIT, I LIKE THE IDEA OF BECOMING "REACQUAINTED".

>This was not what he had been anticipating. From what he had surmised so far, he had expected to find nothing good about his present-day self. But, everything he was reading seemed positive. He remembered how Angel and Buffy had been close and wondered, briefly, if the apparent relationship he had shared with her was at the heart of the tension between himself and the vampire. He doubted it. Angel was too angry. Something more serious must have occurred to embitter the vampire so much toward him. Tapping the direction key, he continued his search.

>JANUARY 1, 2014
THE NEW YEAR IS HERE AND IT'S PROBABLY THE FIRST TIME IN A DECADE THAT I'VE ACTUALLY BELIEVED THIS TO BE A GOOD THING. GABRIEL SPENT THE NIGHT AND WE BROUGHT IN THE NEW YEAR TOGETHER. I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER FELT SO GOOD IN ALL MY LIFE. THE DEMONS ARE FALLING BACK; WE RETOOK FOUR SECTORS JUST YESTERDAY. AND NOW I HAVE GABRIEL. HE SAYS THAT THERE IS A PART OF HIM THAT IS ONLY TRULY ALIVE WHEN WE ARE TOGETHER. I FEEL THE SAME WAY. WHEN THE WAR IS OVER I CAN REALLY SEE US HAVING A LIFE TOGETHER.

>
There was no doubt about the nature of his relationship with

Buffy now. But there was still no answer to why Angel hated him so much.

>
FEBRUARY 14, 2014

>VALENTINE'S DAY MARKS A LOT OF CHANGES WITHIN THE RESISTANCE. ANGEL WAS ELECTED HEAD DIRECTOR OF THE COUNCIL YESTERDAY. GILES IS FINALLY STEPPING DOWN. GABRIEL AND I HAVE BEEN WORRIED ABOUT HIM. LATELY, HE HASN'T BEEN FEELING WELL. GABRIEL THINKS IT MIGHT BE HIS HEART. WE TOOK HIM DOWN TO THE MEDIC YESTERDAY FOR A CHECK-UP AND HE TURNED OUT FINE. HOPEFULLY, THE REDUCED WORKLOAD WILL HAVE A POSITIVE EFFECT ON HIM. ON AN UP NOTE, I NOW HAVE A NEW ROOMMATE. GABRIEL MOVED MOST OF HIS THINGS INTO MY PLACE THIS AFTERNOON AND WE ARE PLANNING A ROMANTIC DINNER FOR TONIGHT. GUESS WE'LL HAVE TO MYSTERIOUSLY LOSE OUR BEEPERS AGAIN. THIS IS SO GREAT!

>He paused as he read his uncle's name. The man had always been driven and stubborn. In the short time Gabriel had spent with him in Sunnydale, he had gained a great deal of respect for the former Watcher's dedication and strength of will. It was no surprise to learn that he had served the Resistance for so long. He felt a small pang of homesickness and he was forced to shove it aside. With no guarantee of ever getting home again, it would be easier for him if he acclimatized himself now instead of waiting on possibly misplaced hope.

>MAY 9, 2014
GABRIEL WAS HONORED BY THE ENTIRE COUNCIL TODAY. IT'S ONLY BEEN A MONTH SINCE HE WAS GRANTED COMMAND OF HIS OWN SQUADRON AND HE'S ALREADY RECEIVED THE MEDAL OF VALOR. I DON'T GET TO SEE HIM AS MUCH NOW THAT HE'S NO LONGER IN MY SQUAD, BUT I'M GLAD THAT HE IS DOING SO WELL. HIS TEAMMATES LOVE HIM, BUT HOW CAN I BLAME THEM? HE HINTED THAT HE HAS SOMETHING TO ASK ME WHEN HE GETS BACK FROM THE FIELD. WILLOW THINKS THAT IT HAS TO DO WITH A RING AND A WHITE DRESS. I'VE LEARNED OVER THE YEARS NOT TO DOUBT HER. BUFFY GILES? I DON'T KNOW, MAYBE I CAN CONVINCE HIM TO TAKE MY NAME INSTEAD LIKE WILLOW DID WITH OZ. AND MAYBE I'M JUST JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS. ONLY TIME WILL TELL.

>
Marriage? His heart started pounding against his ribs. The strange feeling of familiarity he had gotten from Alex started to make sense now. It also explained her impressive battle skills and her possession of an extraordinary sense. The power of a Slayer and a Seventh Son were united within her. Was this Angel's reason for hating him? Curious, he selected another entry.

>
MAY 25, 2014

>I JETTED STRAIGHT TO THE EMERGENCY WARD AS SOON AS I GOT THE CALL. GABRIEL AND HIS SQUADRON WERE AMBUSHED BY FIDES AND A CRACK TEAM OF DEMONS OUTSIDE DETROIT. OZ AND HIS BLUE SQUADRON HAD TO MOUNT A RESCUE ASSAULT TO GET THEM OUT. GABRIEL BARELY ESCAPED WITH HIS LIFE. THE REST OF HIS TEAM WEREN'T SO LUCKY. OUR BEST DOCTORS HAVE BEEN WORKING ON HIM ALL NIGHT TRYING TO SAVE HIS LEG. DOCTOR ELLIOT KEEPS ASSURING ME THAT THEY ARE DOING THEIR BEST AND THAT THINGS LOOK PROMISING. WHY DO I HAVE SUCH A HARD TIME BELIEVING HIM? A MARRIAGE PROPOSAL SEEMS LIKE SOMETHING FROM A DREAM NOW. ALL I WANT IS FOR HIM TO SURVIVE. I HAVE TO STAY STRONG. I DON'T THINK I COULD BEAR IT IF THIS WAR TOOK HIM AWAY FROM ME.

>A tightness in his chest constricted his heart and cold fear gripped him. Oz had told him that the Gabriel he knew had been killed. Was that why there appeared to be no sign of him anywhere? The mention of Fides only increased his trepidation. He had seen first hand what the demon general could do.

>AUGUST 15, 2014
GABRIEL'S BEEN SO RESERVED SINCE THE ATTACK. HE BARELY EVEN TALKS TO ANYONE ANYMORE. ALL HE DOES IS LIE IN BED AND BROOD. DOCTOR ELLIOT SAYS HIS LEG IS DOING MUCH BETTER AND HE SHOULD BE ABLE TO MAKE A FULL RECOVERY. MAYBE HIS MOOD WILL IMPROVE WHEN

HE'S BACK ON HIS FEET AGAIN. THE DEATHS OF HIS TEAMMATES ARE WEIGHING HEAVILY ON HIS MIND, BUT THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE BOTHERING HIM, SOMETHING HE WON'T TELL ME ABOUT. I WISH I HAD MORE TIME TO SPEND WITH HIM, BUT I HAVE TO MEET ANGEL AND THE OTHERS IN THE BRIEFING ROOM IN A LITTLE WHILE TO PLAN THE NEXT SERIES OF RAIDS.

>
He was relieved to find that his future self had survived. Then what could have happened to him? And why did no one remember him? It seemed like anyone who did was trying their best to forget. It was hard to imagine what he might have been like in this time.

>
DECEMBER 2, 2014

>GABRIEL HAS BEEN ON ACTIVE DUTY FOR OVER A MONTH NOW AND I'VE ONLY SEEN HIM IN PASSING. IT SEEMS LIKE HE'S AVOIDING ME. HE STILL HASN'T ACCEPTED COMMAND OF A NEW TEAM, VOLUNTEERING INSTEAD TO TAKE UP A FLOATING POSITION AND ACCOMPANY EVERY MISSION THAT GOES OUT. I THINK HE'S PUSHING HIMSELF TOO HARD, BUT HE WON'T LISTEN TO ME. EVERYONE KNOWS IT WASN'T HIS FAULT, BUT HE STILL BLAMES HIMSELF FOR THE LOSS OF HIS SQUAD. MAYBE I 'LL ASK OZ TO TALK TO HIM, HE'S ALWAYS HAD A WAY OF GETTING THROUGH TO HIM. GOD KNOWS I CAN'T ANYMORE.

>It troubled him to see tension between Buffy and his future self, even if it was referred to in the past tense. For him, it represented the future. He stretched in his chair and scanned through a few more entries.

>DECEMBER 26, 2014
GILES ISN'T DOING SO WELL. HE HAD A MILD HEART ATTACK TWO DAYS AGO AND GABRIEL CAME STRAIGHT HOME TO BE WITH HIM. WE HAD A LONG TALK AND THINGS SEEM TO FINALLY BE GETTING BACK ON TRACK AGAIN. HE'S PROMISED TO SPEND LESS TIME IN THE FIELD. HE LOVES GILES QUITE A BIT AND I THINK THIS SCARE MIGHT HAVE BEEN SOMETHING OF A WAKE UP CALL. HE SEEMED SO MUCH MORE LIKE HIS OLD SELF AGAIN. HE EVEN TOOK ME TO THE OLD ST. PETER'S CHURCH WHERE WE FIRST KISSED. I CAN TELL HE'S STILL HURTING, BUT HE'S GETTING BETTER. HOPEFULLY, NOW WE CAN GET BACK TO THE LIFE WE WERE ABOUT TO START TOGETHER.

>
Again, it looked like his life had begun to settle down, with still no indication of what had happened to turn him into such a pariah.

>
JANUARY 18, 2015

>I FEEL SICK TO MY STOMACH AGAIN TODAY. IT'S BEEN SO STRESSFUL AROUND HERE LATELY, I NEED TO SCHEDULE SOME DOWN TIME SOON. GILES PASSED AWAY LAST NIGHT IN HIS SLEEP. IT WAS TERRIBLE TO FIND OUT THAT HE WAS GONE, BUT, AFTER ALL HIS SUFFERING, AT LEAST NOW HIS PAIN IS OVER. GABRIEL ISN'T TAKING IT WELL AT ALL. NO ONE HAS SEEN HIM ALL DAY. I LOOKED IN THE USUAL PLACES WITH NO LUCK. I WISH HE WOULD JUST OPEN UP TO ME INSTEAD OF BOTTLING HIS FEELINGS INSIDE LIKE THIS. WHATEVER IT IS THAT HE'S HIDING IS EATING HIM UP INSIDE AND I CAN'T SEEM TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT. NOW THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO BUT WAIT. I HOPE HE'S OKAY.

>Uncle Rupert? Dead? The thought was disturbing to him. He wondered, briefly, how much worse it had been for his other self to find out.

>MARCH 18, 2015
GABRIEL'S BEEN MISSING FOR TWO MONTHS NOW AND THE SEARCH HAS BEEN CUT BACK TO ALMOST NOTHING. THE POPULAR THEORY IS THAT HE WAS CAUGHT ALONE BY A DEMON PATROL. I KNOW THIS CAN'T BE TRUE. IF HE WAS DEAD, I'D KNOW IT. HE HAS TO BE OUT THERE SOMEWHERE. BUT WHERE COULD HE BE? AND WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM? ANGEL DOESN'T WANT TO SAY IT IN FRONT OF ME, BUT HE THINKS GABRIEL ABANDONED US. I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT EITHER. I WON'T. I KNOW NOW WHY I'VE BEEN GETTING SICK LATELY AND IT MAKES ME HOPE EVEN HARDER THAT HE COMES HOME SOON.

>
Pregnant? A chill shot through his body as he realized who that

child was and why Oz had been so determined to have him spend so much time with Alex. Gabriel had not known Angel long, but what he did know spoke of honor. Perhaps seeing Buffy bear a child that he could never have fathered had pushed him past the limits of that honor. Gone for two months. Gabriel had a strong feeling that this was the end of his future's tale.

>
AUGUST 15, 2015

>I'VE BEEN OFF ACTIVE DUTY FOR FIVE MONTHS NOW AND I'M STARTING TO GO STIR CRAZY. MY BELLY HAS SWOLLEN SO FAR NOW THAT I FEEL AS BIG AS A HOUSE. I CAN BARELY GET AROUND ANYMORE. THE WAR IS GOING IN OUR FAVOR AND XANDER IS SET TO GIVE HIS FREEDOM DAY ADDRESS TO THE WORLD IN TWO WEEKS. IT'S EXPECTED THAT HE WILL OFFER TERMS OF SURRENDER TO THE DEMON HORDES, NOT THAT THEY'LL ACCEPT, OF COURSE. IT'S JUST A FORMALITY. WHO EVER HEARD OF A DEMON SURRENDERING? AS ALWAYS, I CONTINUE TO WAIT FOR GABRIEL'S RETURN, BUT IT'S GETTING HARDER TO STAY HOPEFUL. BUT AS THE RESISTANCE'S MOTTO GOES, 'WHERE THERE IS LIFE THERE IS HOPE'.

>From what Oz had told him, he already knew what was going to happen to Xander, but the question still remained: What had become of himself? Had anyone even found out? He must have been killed. What else could possibly drive him away from the woman he loved and his unborn child? Leaning into the monitor, he opened another entry and continued to read.

>AUGUST 29, 2015
TODAY IS BOTH THE GREATEST AND WORST DAY OF MY LIFE. AT 10:03 AM THIS MORNING MY DAUGHTER WAS BORN. 8 POUNDS, 2 OUNCES, SHE'S THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING I HAVE EVER SEEN. SHE HAS HER FATHER'S EYES. AT 10:06 AM SENATOR XANDER HARRIS WAS ASSASSINATED DURING HIS SPEECH AT THE FREEDOM DAY CELEBRATION. IT'S HEART BREAKING THAT MY DAUGHTER'S FIRST BREATHS WERE ONLY MINUTES BEFORE XANDER'S FINAL ONES. HER FATHER COULDN'T BE HERE TO HELP NAME HER, SO I CHOSE TO HONOR THE MEMORY OF ONE OF THE FINEST HUMAN BEINGS I HAVE EVER KNOWN. IT SEEMS LIKE ALL I CAN DO ANYMORE IS CRY. HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ALEXANDRA.

>
Gabriel's heart sank. It was ironic that one of the Resistance's greatest fighters would be born on the day when one of its founders was killed. He understood the root of Alexandra's name now, at least.

>
He pushed back from the monitor and rubbed his eyes tiredly. This was getting him nowhere. It was obvious that the reason no one talked about how his future self was killed was that no one really knew. He had simply dropped off the face of the planet and was never seen again. Feeling like he had failed, he scrolled to the bottom of the list to the last entry.

>
APRIL 17, 2023

>THE HELLSPIRE IS WELL ON ITS WAY TO COMPLETION. THERE IS ALREADY A DIRECT CHANNEL TO THE TOWER ON SITE. THIS ASSAULT WILL HAVE TO GO OFF WITHOUT A HITCH. WE WON'T GET ANOTHER CHANCE TO DESTROY IT IF WE FAIL. I'VE VOLUNTEERED FOR THE MISSION, TAKING UP AN HONORARY POSITION WITH MY OLD SQUADRON. I HAVEN'T TOLD ANYONE WHY THOUGH. FOR MONTHS NOW, I HAVE BEEN HAVING DREAMS WHERE GABRIEL IS STANDING IN FRONT OF THE HELLMOUTH, TRYING TO HOLD IT CLOSED. I KNEW HE WAS STILL ALIVE. HE MUST BE A PRISONER INSIDE THE TOWER. THE COUNCIL WOULD NEVER AUTHORIZE A RESCUE MISSION, NOT WITH THE KIND OF SECURITY THE EMPEROR'S GOT SET UP. I HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO TAKE MATTERS INTO MY OWN HANDS. THE HELLSPIRE CHANNEL IS THE ONLY WAY I CAN GET INSIDE THE TOWER UNDETECTED. ALEX DESERVES TO HAVE HER FATHER WITH HER AND I THINK SO DO I.

>That was it. The reason this was the last entry was that Buffy had been killed on that raid. She had died trying to save his life. The dream she had been having sounded surprisingly similar to the one he

had experienced four nights ago. Apparently, she had interpreted it as meaning that the Gabriel she knew had been a prisoner and it had lured her to her doom. But it also suggested that he may not have been killed as everyone seemed to believe. He wondered if anyone else in the base knew. There was one who he was sure was aware of it. Angel's grudge against him wasn't so much of a mystery anymore. With a heavy sigh, he stood up and pressed his fist into the small of his back, stretching. The question was, what could he do to fix things?

>* * *

>Oz yawned, rubbing his eyes, and walked sleepily into the briefing room. Angel was there, crouched down in the shadows at the end of the council table. He had been practically living there for the last few weeks. Oz caught a faint, almost undetectable scent of stale alcohol in the air. Angel hadn't been drinking again, had he? No, he wouldn't. Not after the problem he had developed after Buffy was killed and the struggle he had gone through to quit. Oz made a mental note to schedule some down time for his old friend and then to force him to take it. Even vampires needed rest sometimes.

>"Okay, " he yawned again, "I'm up. What's so urgent that it couldn't have waited another hour. My old bones don't work so well first thing in the morning."

>"This." Angel grimly slid a sheet of paper across the table, watching his friend seriously.

>Oz picked up the sheet and instantly the color drained from his face. "Where did you get this?" he gasped, now fully awake.

>"It's a printout of part of the information that Red Squadron retrieved." Angel sat back in his chair and sighed, "I knew Fides was planning something, but I had no idea that it would be this big."

>"What . . .what are we . . . going to do?" Oz was stunned, almost beyond words.

>Angel's jaw set resolutely, "Send your son to see me, then call a council meeting. We have to make plans now. Before it's too late."

>Oz pursed his lips and nodded, his eyes clouded with worry.

>* * *

>He was wandering through a grassy field near a busy road. The wind was cool and fresh against his face and the sun shone warmly over head. Gabriel squinted into the distance, searching for something. He was here for a reason, he knew. There was something or someone here he was supposed to find.

>A familiar feminine voice called to him, seemingly from all directions at once. He turned and Buffy was standing less than a foot away from him wearing a light summer dress and smiling brightly.

>"Hi." He said, stunned a little by her appearance. She was older than he remembered, but still far younger than her present day friends. She looked to be in her late twenties.

>"I've missed you." She smiled, taking him by the hand and leading him toward the road, "You've been gone for so long."

>He followed her unresistingly, his feet brushing through the tall grass.

>"Where are we going?" he asked, as they approached edge of the road.

>The field was gone now and in its place was a huge city, alive with lights and people. It was night time and the sky was clear and full of twinkling stars. All around them, people milled about, happily

calling out to one another and going about their business.

>"Careful now." She advised with a giggle, leading him through the gridlocked traffic.

>She took him to a building that was small in comparison to the other ones around it. Boxy in shape, with a single tall spire in the middle and stained glass windows lining the upper reaches of the walls, Gabriel recognized it immediately as a church.

>"Do you know where this is?" she asked, pushing the door open and walking inside.

>"It's a church." He answered flatly, not understanding any of what was going on.

>"It's the Saint Peter's church." She laid her hands on his shoulders and leaned her face in close to his, "It's special."

>Gabriel shuddered slightly and stepped out of her embrace. Her touch was only semi-solid and cold, like the feather light caress of a ghost.

>"Saint Peter." He echoed. Peter was his father's name. Another half-buried memory that nagged at his brain.

>"You don't remember me." She realized sadly, "At least not the way I remember you."

>"Why did you bring me here?" he asked, feeling strangely cold in the expansive church.

>"Peter is here, Gabriel." Buffy drew her arm wide and an ancient man, whose eyes looked worn and heavy, was standing near the altar.

>"F-Father?" Gabriel's eyes went wide. The man looked like hell. Physically, he appeared to be impossibly old, withered and frail, with long, scraggly white hair and thin, bony limbs. But the most disturbing part was his eyes. Once green and vibrant like his own, they were now dark and bloodshot, tortured. The closer Gabriel looked, the more sick and haunted they became.

>"Find my son, my Seventh Son." The ancient man pleaded through thin, cracked lips, "Find him and he will help you."

>"But I am your Seventh Son." Gabriel pointed out. There was something distant about both Buffy and Peter that unnerved him. Like they were there and yet not.

>"So is he." Peter nodded plainly, backing away.

>"Wait." The auburn-haired young man reached out to the apparition, but a slender hand touched his shoulder. He turned quickly and found Buffy's ghostly form watching him, her hands by her sides. He could see through her now, as if she was slowly fading away. Looking back, he saw that Peter was gone.

>"It's almost time to go." Buffy reminded him, "We don't have much time left."

>"What do you mean?" Gabriel asked, feeling confused and a little disoriented by his surroundings. Everything seemed to be telling him that he did not belong here.

>"You'll wake up soon." She whispered sadly, stepping close to him and wrapping her slim arms around his waist, her head resting on his chest. He could barely feel her now. "And then I won't be able to see you or talk to you anymore. You have to find him, Gabriel. He holds the key."

>"Who?" he shifted enough that he could look down at her, "Who do I have to find?"

>"Peter's Seventh Son." She answered, "It's the only way."

>"But I AM his Seventh Son." He sighed sharply, frustrated, "I don't understand."

>She reached up and pressed her palms to his cheeks and smiled, a

glitter of tears in her eyes.

>"You will." She assured him, "Protect my daughter. Our daughter."

>Gabriel was overcome by a wave of remorse and sadness over what had become of her and the pain he had caused her.

>"I'm sorry." He whispered, reaching out to cup her chin in his hand, a single tear crawling slowly down his cheek, "About everything."

>"I know. And I forgive you." She leaned into him, her eyes closed and her face upturned, "That's why you have to go now. Give my love to Oz and Willow. And Angel."

>As his lips brushed close to hers, the room filled with light and he felt her dissolve in his arms. He jerked and sat up in bed, still feeling her closeness, his heart pounding in his chest.

>The room was dark, lit only by a single fluorescent bulb near the foot of his bed. He was underground again, back at the Resistance base. Pressing his hands to his face, he blew out a long sigh and crawled out of bed.

>Another dream. Had Buffy been trying to tell him something? Or was it just his overactive imagination getting the best of him? And if she had been trying to tell him something, what was it? Find the Seventh Son. Peter's Seventh Son.

>His head ached dully and he took a moment to massage his temples. He had yet to get an uninterrupted night's rest since he had arrived in this time period and it was starting to take its toll on him. He needed to clear his head, as much as he could, considering the empty haze that still concealed some of his memory. Maybe if he took a walk, he would start to relax and he could get a fresh perspective on the dream. If Buffy was truly trying to tell him something, he had to be able to figure it out before it was too late.

>A sharp knock sounded at his door and he rose groggily to answer it. The door opened on its own and Alex rushed in.

>"Get your uniform on." She commanded, snatching up his jacket from the back of a chair and throwing it at him, "Emergency meeting in the council room. Now."

>Gabriel caught the garment under his arm as she walked past him into the room. Getting his uniform together was not much of a task. Aside from the clothes he had arrived in, it was all he had and he was already wearing it. The mysterious chute in the wall returned him a set of clean clothes everyday and he had alternated between the two outfits out of necessity, assuming that his stay was going to be a short one. By the looks of things, he was going to have to make arrangements to obtain something else to wear.

>"What?" he blinked confusedly.

>It was strange to see Alex after what he had found in Buffy's old files. Up until this point, he had believed Xander was her father, but now things were different. Protect my daughter, Buffy's words wafted through his mind again. Our daughter. His daughter.

>"How did you get in here?" he frowned, slipping the jacket over his shoulders and, reaching for his belt and the two pistols holstered to it. Clipping it around his waist, he buttoned the front of his jacket. He doubted weapons would be needed in the council, but having them with him made him feel more comfortable.

>"You're part of my squad." She shrugged, holding up her keycard, "I have access to all Red Squadron rooms. You ready or what?"

>"Yeah, I guess so." He allowed her to usher him into the hall and toward the council room, "But why do you need me? I got the impression that council meetings are for squad leaders only."

>"They are." She answered, tucking her jet black hair behind her ears in a swift and easy motion as she walked, "They asked us to bring a subordinate along this time. I'm not sure why."

>"So why me?" he turned sideways and half-jogged, trying to keep up with her driven pace while still facing her, "I'm hardly someone you'd want to consult on battle strategy."

>Alex gave a small chuckle, "You think Dar's gonna be able to sit still through an entire council meeting? Besides, you're better than you give yourself credit for." She gave him a friendly prod with her fist, her green eyes twinkling, "That stunt you pulled with Fides was pure genius. Too bad it probably didn't do any lasting damage."

>He nodded in weak agreement as she pulled up just short of the council room doors. The memory of the armored demon's resonant voice still reverberated chillingly through his bones.

>"I guess what I'm saying is that I trust you." She continued, laying her hand gently on his shoulder, "And people you can trust in this day and age are hard to come by."

>"I'm glad you feel that way." He smiled unintentionally, feeling a genuine connection with her, a daughter who was older than he was, "Let's go inside and see what this is all about."

>He pressed the button for the door and they walked inside together. Cole was just taking his seat at the end of the central table while one of his teammates remained standing next to him, to his right. There were only enough seats for the squad leaders, so, apparently, the subordinates would be required to stand for the duration of the meeting. He hoped it wouldn't be a long one. Alex took the seat across from Cole while Gabriel remained standing next to her.

>"So what is this all about?" Alex pressed Cole for an answer.

>"Beats me." The Gold Squadron leader shrugged, "Your guess is probably as good as mine."

>Oz and Angel were also present, as were half of the other squad leaders and their subordinates. Although he was doing his best to seem calm and unconcerned, Alex could sense a deep worry in her uncle's eyes when she looked down the table at him.

>She sat back in her chair and folded her arms tightly across her chest. At least none of the other squad leaders seemed to know any more than she did. Small comfort. Looking again to the far end of the table, she caught the Head Director watching her. Angel's dark eyes darted away instantly.

>They said he was the last living vampire on the planet, the others of his kind having fallen quickly in the first days of the war. She found him creepy, always lurking, always watching her, it seemed. But he was a great commander. Everyone knew, without a doubt, that the Resistance would have collapsed long ago without him. She could respect that, at least.

>The last of the squad leaders and their subordinates took their place at the table and Angel flicked off the lights, leaving only the cloudy beam of a projector to cast illumination on the wall. He slipped a clear stencil over the source of the light and a topographical map appeared on the wall. Alex recognized it immediately as an area referred to as the 'forbidden zone', in the direct center of which stood the legendary Tower.

>"Based on information retrieved on the last raid, we have learned some very disturbing news." Angel informed the assembly in his usual grim manner, "The demons are raising new Hellspires. Five of them."

>A chorus of shocked gasps and mutterings ran through the gathering.

>"How is that possible?" the leader of Green Squadron broke through the chaotic murmuring, scratching the stubble on his chin and frowning, "The manpower costs alone would be incredible."

>"You're right." Angel nodded, "But they know we don't have the soldiers to launch five separate attacks of this scale. And it gets worse. Take a look at the locations."

>The vampire produced a small, red marker. Taking the marker, he made five small X's in the rough shape of a circle on the map. Drawing a series of lines between them, he made the shape of a five pointed star, a pentagram.

>"What do you think is right in the middle of all this?" Angel asked, tapping the tip of the marker into the center of the pentagram, his voice heavy with foreboding.

>"The Hellmouth." Alex breathed, stunned, "They're going to widen it, aren't they?"

>Angel regarded her with deadly seriousness, "More like blow it wide open."

>The dark-haired girl folded her arms across her chest and leaned back in her chair, her face knotted in thought.

>"So what are we going to do about it?" she asked determinedly.

>Oz slipped the current stencil from the projector and replaced it with a new one, some sort of weapon schematic.

>"We aren't without a plan." The old werewolf said, his eyes dark with worry, "But it's very dangerous and it will involve every soldier we've got."

>Alex grinned in a show of manufactured bravado, "I don't know about the rest of you, but I wasn't expecting to die of old age."

>The other squad leaders nodded and thumped their hands on the table in assent. Gabriel looked down at Alex and smirked to himself. He could imagine Buffy saying those very same words.

>"The demon forces have to be spread thin," Oz reasoned, "so we're going to take a big risk and go for the heart. One team will attack each of the five Hellspire sites and keep the demons there busy. Four more squads will take on the Tower."

>Gabriel did a mental count in his head and came up one squad short.

>"What about the last squad?" Cole voiced Gabriel's question for him.

>"Theirs is the real mission. They will infiltrate the Tower through the old Burrower tunnels underneath it." Oz nodded slowly, tapping a thick finger on the weapon schematic, "Academy Master Marcus is putting the final touches on an explosive that we think may be powerful enough to disrupt the structure of the Hellmouth and close it off. The only problem is that it has to be set off at ground zero."

>"No sweat," Alex dusted her hands against one another and smiled, "My team will be in and out of there in no time. The demons won't even know what hit them."

>"Forget about it, Summers." Cole chuckled, "This assignment has Gold Squadron written all over it."

>"Cole's right, Alex." Oz pointed out, "Your team will be better off on the surface assault."

>Alex jumped to her feet, indignant, "You can't be serious! You want the best team you've got to run distraction while the real work is going on inside? One team won't make a difference on the surface, but

it could change everything within."

>Angel was shaking his head, disagreeing with her before he even heard what she was saying.

>"I agree with Alex." Gabriel opened his mouth for the first time since the meeting had begun, "We have no idea what's inside the Tower. You might be sending Cole and his team in there to die."

>Angel fixed the auburn-haired young man with a withering glare. That's exactly what we're doing, he thought. The chances of the infiltrating team escaping alive were next to none, but they had no other option. Someone had to do it. Angel had felt another small part of his soul turn black when he had made the choice. Most of Cole's team were Terakans, if anyone would choose to die, it would be them. But it still didn't make it any easier.

>"The decision has been made." Angel declared resolutely, "There will be no more discussion."

>"Then don't discuss it." Alex's temper flared, "Reassign my team and move on."

>Angel's eyes narrowed and his fist tightened in his lap.

>Cole raised his hand slowly, "Red and Gold squadrons DO have a pretty good record on tandem missions. We might really need them."

>Alex favored Cole with an appreciative glance, her almond-shaped green eyes smiling and warm. The stern Terakan softened immediately under the look.

>Angel folded his hands tightly in front of him. What they were saying made sense on a logical level. If this mission failed, then the world would never be the same. It was his responsibility to ensure that it didn't. But he was afraid. Twelve years ago, Buffy had been killed in an explosion. There hadn't even been a body left behind for him to mourn over. Now, her daughter was asking for the same fate.

>He was faced with an impossible choice. Sacrifice the last fragment of his love or sacrifice the rest of the world. What would Buffy have done? He knew. She had been faced with this decision once before, a long time ago before the mouth of the demon Acathla.

>"Fine." He agreed with a heavy heart, feeling like he had just thrown away something of unfathomable importance, "Red Squadron may be reassigned to the infiltration team if they so choose."

>"Yeah." Alex crowed gleefully and leaned across the table, grinning at Cole, "I'll try not to leave your team out of ALL the fun."

>Cole accepted her challenge with raised eyebrows and a confident smirk.

>"Order, order!" Oz thumped the brass cylinder crossly on its wooden pedestal, "This is nothing to be laughing about! The chances of coming out of this alive aren't good. Think about this before you decide."

>The old werewolf prayed that she would reconsider. He and Willow had known Alex since she was a newborn and personally taken care of her ever since her mother had died. She was as much a daughter to them as Darlene and now he was faced with the very real possibility of losing them both. But he could tell from experience that she was not going to back down. His sadness was matched only by the great respect he had for her dedication and fighting spirit.

>"I'm aware of the danger, Uncle." She assured him confidently, "And I fully intend to get us out of there in one piece. Red Squadron stands by the new assignment."

>"So, how is this explosive supposed to be go off?" Cole directed his question to Angel, "A timer?"

>"No, the timer is only a secondary means." Angel informed him, "You'll set it with a remote detonator and then signal a mass retreat for yourselves and the surface troops."

>Oz tapped his finger again on the projected stencil image, "Just in case things get really bad, there is a manual detonator, as well, which is indicated by a red light here" he indicated a small panel on the side of the bomb diagram. "You'll be given the activation codes before you leave here today. In the event that the squad leader is unable to set the bomb, it will be the responsibility of their chosen subordinate to complete the task. Any questions?" He looked around and saw the same expression of resigned resolve on the faces of everyone in attendance. They all seemed to be aware of what their responsibilities would be.

>Angel stood and inhaled a deep breath, "Oz will take care of the specific strategies. I need to rest for a while. Permission to leave the proceedings?" He couldn't participate in this anymore. He could not be a part of a plan that was going to kill Buffy's daughter. Oz nodded and Angel left the table.

>Gabriel had observed calmly throughout the briefing, his insides twisted in nervous agitation. In a few hours, he was about to take part in a mission that would determine the fate of mankind. The weight of the decision was intimidating, but he refused to turn away from it. He glanced at Angel and found the vampire glaring in his direction as he walked to the doorway and exited. Gabriel's lips tightened in determination. No matter what it would take, he would prove himself to them and make amends for how his elder self had abandoned them.

>The briefing turned out to be pretty straight forward. Using a device called a geometer, Red and Gold Squadrons would traverse the extensive tunnels underneath the forbidden zone and locate the base of the Tower. After that, they would infiltrate the structure and set the explosive on the Hellmouth. After sounding the order to retreat, they would, themselves, escape and then detonate the bomb. End of the Hellmouth, end of the Tower, end of the war. Piece of cake, right? Somehow, he doubted it would be that easy.

>* * *

>After the briefing ended, Gabriel slipped away and made his way down to a room on the lower levels, near the firing range. He sat pensively before three bronze statues, imagining them to be real, living people. He had no idea why he had come here, but he wanted to be around old friends, ones who remembered who he really was. They all looked older than he remembered them, but he was starting to get used to that.

>It was strange how the upcoming battle had become so important to him. When he had first found himself stranded in this time period, his only desire was to get home and leave this place behind, a distant memory. The loneliness and destitution of the place had shaken him to the core. But gradually, he came to see the lighter side of things, the 'little pockets of goodness' as Oz called them. The Resistance was filled with caring, dedicated people, he had witnessed that in the actions of Cole, Darlene and Alex. Now, he wanted to be a part of that, to spend his life in the pursuit of freedom and to protect those who needed it.

>Even though he had never known it until it was too late, all the extensive, grueling training he had undergone since childhood had been solely for the purpose of his father's personal gain. Without his father to guide him, he had lost focus, having had no goals in life other than the ones that had been fed to him. Here, he was

accomplishing something, fighting for a better tomorrow. This was his chance to make a difference. It was unfortunate that his whole world had had to come crashing down around him before he could experience such a revelation.

>He smiled sadly at Buffy's statue. She had known that simple truth from the start. He had seen it in her from the first moment he had laid eyes on her and it had drawn him to her and inspired him. Within her had been a fighting spirit that would not be conquered. She had been, in every sense of the word, a hero.

>There was a shuffling sound behind him and Angel staggered into the room, a bottle of liquor in his hand. He stopped short, swaying, and focused his bleary vision on Gabriel.

>"What are you doing here?" he demanded angrily, "You have no right!"

>Gabriel raised his hands non-threateningly, "Look Angel, I just came down here to do a little thinking, all right?"

>"No, it's not all right." The drunken vampire snarled, his left eye twitching, "I know what you were doing. I know you went into her files. How much did you find out?"

>Angel's face was flushed and blotchy with drunkenness and rage. Gabriel forced his voice to remain calm in an effort not to antagonize him.

>"I know about my involvement with the Resistance." He stated carefully, "And I know about my connection to Buffy. And Alex."

>The two names hit Angel like sling stones, battering his wounded heart. His face turned hard and his jaw set. He closed his eyes tightly against the memories.

>"Why did you do it?" he asked plaintively, "How could you leave them?"

>"I don't know." Gabriel wished he had an apology for his other self, "I'm not the same man as the Gabriel you knew."

>"You had everything!" the vampire hissed, falling back against the wall, and shook his fist at the auburn-haired young man, "You had your own command, you had friends and you had HER!"

>Angel's body seemed to collapse in on itself, shuddering brokenly with inner torment. Gabriel realized that he was crying.

>"I did my best to be happy for her, for both of you, to try and forget my own needs." He sobbed, "And for a while, I did. She was genuinely happy when she was with you and as long as she continued to smile, I could live with the fact that she wasn't with me."

>The drunken vampire advanced on Gabriel, stabbing an accusing finger in his direction, "You had EVERYTHING. Everything that I could ever dream of and you threw it all away! And then Alexandra came along. And it was all perfect. But it wasn't me!"

>Angel leaned forward challengingly, tears streaking his cheeks and his pointed teeth clenched in choking emotion.

>Gabriel backed up a step, then another as the vampire drew closer to him. He was drunk and emotionally unstable for the moment. Gabriel didn't like the wild look in the vampire's pain-ridden eyes.

>"I hated you for leaving her. For leaving THEM." He slowed, seeming to get lost in his own thoughts, and looked at Gabriel sadly, "She never gave up believing in you, you know that? Even after you abandoned her. She kept seeing you in her dreams, begging her for help. She kept it a secret from the others, but she came to me and told me she was going to the Tower to rescue you. I knew it was a mistake, but she wouldn't listen."

>Angel straightened, collecting himself, and glared at Gabriel,

"You'd been dead for eight years and she still loved you enough to risk her life on a million-to-one shot at getting you back. And they murdered her for it."

>"I - He couldn't have helped it. He must have been killed. I wouldn't have just left her." Gabriel's heart was pounding in his chest as his mind ran rampant in search of an explanation. "There must have been a reason."

>"There IS a reason." Angel growled, coming nose to nose with the Seventh Son, "You're a coward."

>Gabriel could smell the stink of alcohol on the vampire's breath and feel the heat of the rage that burned inside him. He needed to get away, to think things through. This person that Angel hated so much couldn't have been him. He would never do the things that his other self had been accused of. But, apparently, he had.

>"Get out of my way. I have to go." Gabriel refused to look Angel in the eyes, his heart heavy with guilt. But how could he defend himself over things he hadn't even done yet?

>Angel wouldn't budge, intent on turning the encounter into a physical fight.

>"It's your fault she's dead." Angel whispered brokenly, "If you had left her alone she would still be alive now."

>His eye continued to twitch, more violently now.

>"Shut up!" Gabriel shoved the vampire and pushed past him.

>Angel grabbed him by the arm and spun him around, his face contorted into an animalistic visage, "I won't let you do the same thing to Alexandra."

>Gabriel looked to Angel's hand on his arm and then looked the vampire in the face.

>"Let me go, Angel." He said with enforced calm, "You're drunk. You need to sober up and cool off."

>"No, this is all YOUR fault!" he snarled, "You came back here and stirred everything up again. You couldn't just leave us in peace." His face fell suddenly and his voice became weak and tired. "You couldn't leave . . . her . . . in peace."

>His lip curling in anger, Gabriel grabbed Angel by the collar of his jacket and pulled him in close.

>"You probably don't remember it, but I owe you a great deal." He said, his green eyes hard and penetrating, "And that's the only reason why I'm not going to knock you out right now."

>Shoving the drunken vampire hard against the dais, he spun on his heel and stalked out of the room, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. Angel hit the solid surface and fell to his knees, overcome by a fresh bout of tears.

>Gabriel stormed through the wide, sterile hallways, his jaw clenched and his brow furrowed in anger. A few people noticed him as he walked and moved quickly to get out of his way. At first, he was headed for his quarters, but took a sharp turn halfway there. He wouldn't be able to find peace here. He needed someplace that was entirely removed from the Resistance base and all the history that went with it.

>Coming into the sub train loading bay, he found one of the cars empty with the door wide open. Walking inside, he closed the door behind him and climbed into the driver's seat. He had no idea how to operate the vehicle, but it didn't seem that hard. The thing was on tracks, so it wasn't like he had to steer or anything.

>There was a grid-like console directly in front of him with a top view of a map with various points, presumably drop off points, marked along a series of lines representing transport tunnels. Not really caring where he ended up as long as it was away from the base, he

tapped his finger on a random dot. The engine jerked and roared to life and the car started moving. Apparently, it was automated. Still fuming, Gabriel folded his hands tightly before him and settled in for the ride.

>* * *

>Fides stood on a high landing on the huge central chamber inside the Tower. Below, in the great bowl which formed the floor, more than a thousand demons were gathered, prepared to hear her latest command. The armored demoness waited, purposely holding her servants in suspense. Even after all these years, she had never tired of that feeling of power. But it was time to get down to business.

>She stepped to the edge of the landing and spread her arms high overhead.

>"The time has come to end this!" she bellowed, her resonant double-voice reaching even the farthest corners of the chamber, "We have waited long enough. The earth should be ours!"

>The congregation of demons roared in a chorus of agreement. Fides let the sound rise to a crescendo before dropping her hands in unspoken command. The multitude of cries fell into silence in an instant.

>"I have discovered the location of the Resistance's home base." She grinned darkly, as the sea of followers bristled with tension, "We're going to launch an attack."

>And the sea burst forth with a tumult of ecstatic, bloodthirsty screams.

>* * *

>Gabriel clambered over a pile of unstable rubble and hopped to the ground on the other side. The sub-train car had stopped automatically at an old, unused depot. Exiting the depot, he had scaled a metal ladder up to a well-concealed exit hole. Climbing out onto the surface, he was reminded that nowhere in this cursed future lent itself to peaceful contemplation. The land here looked the same as everywhere else, blasted and wasted, with what appeared to be the remains of a city nearby. It had fallen into ruin long ago, by the look of things.

>All of the taller buildings had been obliterated and most of the smaller ones were buried in mountains of broken glass and rubble. Some of the streets were still passable, however, having been cleared out gradually over the years. He followed one of the streets further into the city, morbidly fascinated by the skeletal remains of the once teeming metropolis. He had no idea where he was going, he just wanted to get away. One direction seemed as good as the next. At times, Gabriel's keen ears and sharp eyes caught signs of the city's inhabitants, some human, some not. They moved furtively through the gloom, scurrying away at the first sign of his approach, like rats.

>Gabriel drew one of his pistols and held it cautiously close to his body as he walked. He caught the eye of a pitiful creature as it dug through the refuse and it froze, fearfully, before disappearing into the darkness. He shook his head sadly. It made his heart ache to see that much of the human race had been reduced to derelicts and scavengers, consumed by despair and living in perpetual night.

>A wave of familiarity washed over him and he stumbled with the force of it. It was similar to the feeling he had gotten when he had first seen Alex or Buffy only it was easily ten times more powerful. What could set off such a reaction? A shiver ran up his spine as he ventured a guess. He could feel the source of the sensation hidden somewhere in the rubble.

>Gabriel slid down a steep piece of upturned pavement in a cloud of dust and clattering rocks and landed roughly on his feet. No more than a hundred feet ahead of him was the broken stub of a building that had once been quite tall and extravagant. The top portion had been ripped away, as if by some careless giant's fist, and the walls were cracked and crumbling. Shards of stained glass littered the ground. It was the church from his dream. Closing his eyes, he sensed the source of the strange sensation inside the building, a presence that was both familiar and frightening.

>Gabriel's chest tightened in anxiety and his right leg started to throb with dull pain. Readyng his weapon, he crept forward quietly, circling the building. Rubble and debris blocked the regular entrances, but he spotted an opening in the side wall.

>Gabriel ducked through the opening and crept into the interior of the ruined building. Inside, it was dark and gloomy, but most of the debris had been cleared away and there were a few pieces of salvageable furniture arranged around the large central chamber. A broken staircase led up to what had once been another floor, but most of the upper level had collapsed, leaving only a small landing.

>"Hello?" he called into the emptiness, feeling the presence closer than ever now.

>"Who are you?" a voice growled irritably from the landing.

>Gabriel whirled around, hopping back toward the broken wall, and brought both pistols up. A weathered old man crouched on the edge of the landing, peering down at him suspiciously. He recognized the man immediately and his leg gave another peculiar throb.

>"Just a wanderer." Gabriel answered, slowly lowering his weapons, wondering if the man recognized him, as well.

>"There's no one here but me." The old man pulled himself back away from the edge, eyeing the young man distrustfully. "I'm a wanderer, myself. And I don't like visitors."

>"I noticed." Gabriel opened his arms in a non-threatening posture and advanced slowly. "I'm sorry if I woke you, Wanderer, but I need to talk to you."

>The gray haired man fumbled inside the bundle of rags he wore and quickly produced a scuffed and battered pistol. "Not one step further." He aimed the weapon at Gabriel's midsection.

>"You're going to kill me just for waking you up?" Gabriel frowned, raising his hands slowly into the air.

>His Second Sight revealed an aura of shimmering green and gold light rays around the man. Every living person's aura was unique, like a fingerprint, and Gabriel shuddered as he knew, without a doubt, that he would see the same gold and green light rays if he looked into a mirror. He finally knew what had happened to his future self. Peter's Seventh Son.

>The man's gray hair hung to his shoulders in a wispy and disheveled mass and his clothes were little more than a collection of dirty rags. His bloodshot eyes were sunken and rimmed with dark circles and his jaw was outlined with patchy, gray whiskers. With a shudder that confirmed his suspicions, Gabriel noted that the man's irises were green with a tiny halo of gold. Just like his own.

>"I've killed for less. But you didn't wake me." The old man kept the pistol trained on him, "Sleep and I had a little falling out years ago and since then, we don't see each other much. Sit down."

>Gabriel hooked the leg of a rickety chair with his toe and pulled it

over, carefully keeping his hands in plain view. "So are you going to shoot me or not?" he asked conversationally, easing down into the chair.

>"I might." The old man's voice carried a steely edge.

>Gabriel sighed to himself and lowered his hands, absently fingering a small splinter that was sticking out of the arm of the chair. "Then I guess you should know that the firing mechanism on that gun is broken off."

>The vagabond allowed his arm to fall to his side. "Yeah, I know." He admitted with a sigh, letting the pistol clatter to the floor. "The PL-55 isn't state of the art anymore, but it does the job in keeping the rabble away." He regarded Gabriel for the first time without a clouding veneer of anger. "You've got guts, kid. What's your name?"

>"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." He answered, a knot of anxiety turning in his stomach.

>"Try me." His older self challenged, "I'm pretty perceptive sometimes."

>"Why don't you come down here so we can talk face to face?" Gabriel asked him.

>"And walk right into your trap?" the man cackled madly, "Forget it, I wasn't born yesterday!"

>"I could shoot a hole through you at any time." Gabriel assured him, patting one of the guns at his waist, "If I wanted you dead, you would be."

>The old man shrugged, unconcerned, and climbed stiffly down a rope which hung from the landing for just such a purpose. "Why do you want to talk to me?" He asked as he lowered himself to the floor. Gabriel noted that he limped a little, on his right side, "I don't talk to people from around here. But you're not from around here, are you?"

>"No, I'm not." Gabriel shook his head, "That's why I need your help."

>"Oh, you need my help, do you?" the old man crowed to himself, "First you just want to talk, but now you want my help. I've got to warn you, kid, my help doesn't come cheap."

>Gabriel's eyes narrowed and his fists clenched around the arms of his chair. He was beginning to see why Angel had hated him so much. "I'm getting real tired of this little verbal dance, old man." He growled, "Look at me. I mean really LOOK at me and you'll know why I'm here."

>The old beggar narrowed his eyes shrewdly and stared intently at Gabriel. The young man recognized the look of concentration and knew that he was focusing the Second Sight.

>"I know who you are. I KNOW who you are!" he bounced to his feet and stumbled with his slight limp, leaping forward and grabbing Gabriel's chair by the arms. He leaned forward, his weathered, dirty face a mask of intensity. Gabriel recoiled a little from the crude brutishness of the man. The stink of him was purely offensive. Beneath the matted, dirty, gray locks and filthy brows, the man's scrutinizing eyes danced with a wild light.

>"Good." Gabriel gasped a little around the stink, "Now maybe we can get somewhere."

>"How?" his older self asked, backing off a little in shock, at a loss for further words.

>"I'm not really sure myself." Gabriel answered, more comfortable now with the distance between them, "Needless to say, I'm here."

>"So then why are you HERE?" his chin jutted in challenge. He had

that wild look in his eyes again.

>Gabriel sighed roughly in frustration. The man's misplaced paranoia was getting annoying.

>"You're wearing a Resistance uniform. Did they send you?" the elder threw his head back with a bitter smile, "I thought those tired old fools would have given up looking for me by now." Gabriel noted how he edged subtly closer to the exit hole in the wall.

>"They did. A long time ago. They think you're dead. Up until now, so did I." He assured his older self. "I just had to get away from there for a while."

>"Had a bit of a problem, did you?" Old Gabriel stopped moving toward the doorway and folded his arms across his chest with a smirk, "I see the atmosphere at the base hasn't changed much."

>"I saw this place in a dream." Young Gabriel murmured, looking all around him, "but it was different."

>"The Saint Peter's church has always been a safe place for you." A peculiar glint appeared in his bloodshot eyes, "Maybe our meeting was supposed to happen."

>Gabriel didn't answer, shifting uncomfortably from side to side, watching his elder self.

>"You're disappointed, aren't you?" Old Gabriel read his face plainly, "I guess I don't blame you."

>"I need answers." Gabriel regarded the older man seriously. "I have to know what happened. Why did you leave them?"

>"You really don't know, do you?" the old beggar sneered at him. When Gabriel didn't answer, he started pacing a wide circle around his younger self.

>"I guess they don't even talk about me, huh?" he snorted, "Like they can erase me from existence just by pretending. Idiots."

>He continued to walk in circles, muttering to himself under his breath, apparently carrying on both sides of a conversation.

>Gabriel cleared his throat, interrupting the man's self-absorbed yammerings. "I thought you were going to tell me why you left."

>The old man stopped in mid step, once again aware of Gabriel's presence.

>"They never knew, but the Emperor wasn't the one who brought the demons to earth." He said, his voice heavy with guilt. "It was me. I went back and used the Sword of Seals to open the Hellmouth."

>The last of the fog that had clouded Gabriel's memory since he had arrived in this time period lifted and a burst of memories flooded his mind.

>"You went back for HIM, didn't you? You wanted to save Father." Gabriel remembered fighting the Kevares demon alongside Buffy in the mayor's office, but there were two separate memories of how the battle ended in his mind. In the first, his father had been dragged through the portal by the dying demon, just as he had remembered before he had invoked the gypsy spell. There was a second, however, where Gabriel had rescued the Sword of Seals and later used it to reopen the portal and rescue his father. Both seemed equally real in his mind.

>"Yes." The elder Seventh Son nodded, recognizing the revelation his other self was experiencing, and eased down to sit on the dirty floor. "But something went wrong. The Hellmouth didn't close. I was so concerned with getting out of there before anyone found us that I didn't even notice. I took him to a privately purchased property in Eastern Canada, so that no one would ever find us. Two months later, the first attacks began and the war started."

>"So you - I - am the reason for all this?" Young Gabriel drew in a deep breath and released it slowly. His heart thumped painfully in his chest as the realization set in. "It's all my fault?"

>"All OUR fault." The old man clarified, "Now do you understand why I'm not the man you hoped I would be?"

>"I'm beginning to." He sat down across from his older self, "The files I read on you said you joined the Resistance. But not until thirteen years later. Where were you all that time?"

>"Peter was very ill." The grizzled old man shook his head sadly, "Time in the Hellmouth works much faster than here. He was only in there for less than a day in our time, but, to him, it was more like a year. His mind was . . . not well."

>"And you stayed to care for him." Gabriel reasoned, knowing that he would have done the same thing. "But why didn't you join the Resistance and take him with you? He would have been taken care of there."

>"It didn't take long for me to figure out how the demons had gotten through. I lied to myself, pretended that it would all go away." The elder relaxed into the tale, having committed every moment of it to painstaking memory. "Then, as the war dragged on, I thought of it as someone else's responsibility. After that, I told myself that they just didn't need me. Truthfully, I was just afraid. I didn't want them to find out what I did. Especially her."

>"Buffy." He nodded, knowing again how his other self would think, "So what made you finally join?"

>"When Father died, it was almost like the past had gone with him. I felt like I had a clean slate again. I'd been following the movements of the Resistance through news reports and pirated communications signals for years. I decided it was time to take a more active roll. I almost didn't make it, though. I remember approaching the central office in Washington and I was so nervous that I almost turned and ran. Imagine it, thirty two years old and I was about to run away from a building."

>"What stopped you?"

>"It probably sounds like the foolish meanderings of a senile old man, but it was her." his eyes grew wistful and the seemingly perpetual scowl that was etched into his features lifted. "I thought of her and it gave me the strength to go on. She recognized me instantly when they took me to her. Plowed right through a nest of armed bodyguards and threw her arms around me. After that, I had no doubts. I joined the Resistance."

>"But you left again two years later? Why?"

>"You don't miss a trick, do you, kid?" the old man smirked, "I thought I had forgotten my guilt, sent it to the grave with my father. But every time I saw someone die, or heard of the destruction the demon army was causing, I secretly blamed myself."

>"Like when your squad was ambushed."

>The elder Gabriel's eyes clouded with remembered pain.

>"That was the beginning of the end for me." He said, "I came face to face with the Emperor for the first time since his Ascension. He had a new friend with him. She killed every one of them right in front of me and then shattered my leg. Oz's Blue Squadron barely got me out of there in one piece."

>"The Emperor's friend? Fides?" Gabriel guessed.

>"That's what they call her now, but she used to have a different name." the elder arched a scruffy eyebrow, "How well do you remember your Latin?"

>"Fides?" Gabriel whispered softly, "Fides means . . . Faith."

>"The Emperor shared the secrets of his Ascension with her." He nodded thoughtfully, "I don't think anyone else even knows who she really is. Or was."

>He pawed around inside his tattered shirt and found a flat, metal flask and uncorked it. Pressing the neck of it to his lips, he quickly tipped it back and took a swallow.

>"I started volunteering for every mission that came up, taking greater and greater risks. I was looking for Fides, to avenge my teammates. Or maybe I was just hoping that the demons would kill me because I was too afraid to do it myself. Who knows?" he continued, "Buffy knew something was wrong, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her. When Uncle Rupert died, it was just too much. I disappeared without a trace. I figured that everyone would be better off with me out of the way. I had planned to kill myself. Instead I started drinking. The rest, as they say, is history."

>"So then Angel was right." Gabriel looked at him, crestfallen. "You are a coward."

>"He WOULD say something like that." The old man spat bitterly, "Self-righteous bastard. What were you expecting? You, of all people, should mind what you say. In the same circumstances you would have done the same thing. In fact, you already have."

>"No!" Gabriel jumped to his feet, angrily, "I would have tried harder. I would have done SOMETHING to help. Anything, instead of burying my head in the sand and drinking my life away!"

>"What's the matter Gabriel? You wanted to see your future and here it is." The old man raised the flask to him in a sarcastic toast, "You're not a hero. You're just a pathetic drunk."

>"It doesn't have to be this way." He shook his head sadly, feeling disappointment and pity for his older self. "Come back with me. You can redeem yourself."

>"Why should I?" he sneered caustically, standing and turning his back on Gabriel, "My life is already over. Go back to your Resistance and leave me alone."

>"Do it for her." Young Gabriel pleaded, "If you don't care about yourself, then do it for Buffy."

>The old man stood perfectly still and silent for a long moment, his arms crossed around his torso, hugging himself against some unbearable pain.

>"Before you showed up here, I hadn't thought of her in years." He explained in a low voice, "But there was a time when I could think of nothing else. This place used to be special for us in its better days, you know. I used to dream that we'd be married here."

>"You know that she's . . . " Gabriel's voice trailed off. He wondered if the news might be enough to send the unstable man over the edge for good.

>"Dead?" he cocked a wry eyebrow, peering back over his shoulder. "Yeah, I know. When it happened, I thought I was too drunk to feel anything, but I was wrong. The pain came out of the night and hit me like a comet. We had a special connection, she and I. I spent the next two hours screaming and vomiting. Not that that was anything new to me, of course." He slumped to the floor on his knees, "Look, kid, you're barking up the wrong tree. Go away."

>The old man still didn't want to help. Gabriel found it so frustrating. How could he have become so callous? But there was still one more card to play.

>"Did you know that she had a daughter?" Gabriel asked seriously, watching the man for some sort of reaction.

>"A. . .daughter?" the old man rose again and turned, folding his

arms tensely over his chest, "Who . . . ? Who is . . . the father?"

>"Do you have to ask?" Gabriel folded his arms in front of him, mirroring his older self, "She's almost twenty. Do the math."

>The elder unfolded his arms, his face stricken, and reached his hands out to grasp the shoulders of his younger self.

>"I-I didn't know." He whispered, his throat tight, "H-How could I have?"

>"Now will you come back with me?" he took the old man's hand, seeing a tiny glimmer of change in him, "We're staging a raid on the Tower. We have a plan, but it's dangerous. They've developed a bomb that might be powerful enough to close the Hellmouth for good."

>The older man's eyes narrowed and he rubbed his grizzled chin, deep in thought.

>"Sounds dangerous." He considered, "Too dangerous. But there might be another way."

>"What?" Young Gabriel asked, confused.

>"I'll go with you." The elder asserted, "But we have to make a side trip first."

>The young man checked his watch, "The squadrons leave in less than an hour. We have to get back soon."

>Gabriel's older self smiled, a glint of strength in his eyes. "Trust me, it will be worth it."

>* * *

>Darlene entered the loading area's antechamber with Alex's newly-repaired helmet under her arm. Most of Red Squadron had already outfitted themselves and moved on to the sub-train bay, but Alex had stayed behind, waiting.

>"Here, " Darlene smiled, tossing the helmet to her friend, "Marcus wanted me to remind you to duck next time."

>Alex caught the helmet easily and sat it face down in her lap.

>"Thanks, " she smirked, running her fingertips over the back of the helmet. Marcus was an amazing technician. There wasn't even a trace of the crack that had been there. "I'll try and remember that." She noticed a strange, wide-barreled handgun hooked into Darlene's belt. "What's that?"

>Darlene hoisted the pistol in her hand proudly. It looked heavy despite its small size.

>"The latest in trial-wear." She beamed, admiring the weapon, "A hand-held grenade launcher. I've only got a few shells, but it should really pack a wallop when we need it."

>"Good." Alex said as Darlene hooked the gun back into her belt, "I have a feeling we're going to need all the firepower we can get."

>"Speaking of which," Darlene quirked a crooked smile, "where has our lovable sharpshooter gotten himself off to?"

>"No one's seen him since the council meeting." Alex shrugged to herself as she slipped on her helmet and tightened the strap, "I wonder where he is?"

>Darlene sat down on the bench beside her and laid a consoling hand on her shoulder. "He'll be here, Alex. I promise. You've got to keep your mind focused on the mission. This is the big one, remember? Trust me, he'll be here."

>Darlene was right, Alex realized. She couldn't afford to get distracted at a time like this. With the scope of the mission they were about to undertake, one man could hardly make a difference.

>"It's almost time to leave." Darlene noted, checking her watch, "We should get out there before they take a head count. Don't want Head Director Angel getting pissed at us, do you?" She smirked devilishly to herself. "Though I wouldn't be too upset if he had to punish me. You think he's into spanking?"

>"Do you ever get your mind out of the gutter?" Alex shook her head softly in bemused exasperation, "Let's go."

>They stood and went out through the sliding hydraulic door into the wide launch bay. The last members of Gold Squadron were just loading themselves into a sub-train car. The car's motor roared loudly as it rumbled into the traffic tube and disappeared into the darkness. One more car slid into the empty space behind it and the door hissed slowly open.

>Head Director Angel watched the proceedings grimly, his dark, brooding eyes missing nothing. Alex felt his gaze on her as she entered the room. Oz and Willow were there too, as they always were before she and Darlene went out on a mission. The rest of her squad stood off to one side in a small group, anxiously looking back and forth amongst themselves. The question on their minds was the same as the one on hers. Where was Gabriel?

>"We can't afford to wait any longer." Director Angel announced darkly, "Red Squadron, load up. You'll have to do without him."

>Darlene and her teammates filed slowly into the car and took their seats, leaving only Alex behind.

>"Wait," Alex protested desperately, stubbornly refusing to board the car, "He'll be here. I know it."

>Willow looked to her adopted daughter with a mixture of sadness and compassion in her eyes. Beside her, her husband pursed his lips and looked down at the floor in disappointment, his shoulders sagging in defeat. They had both hoped things would have been different this time.

>"Gabriel isn't coming back, Alexandra." Angel informed her with deadly earnest. "He's gone AWOL. He abandoned everyone. Again."

>"Again?" she pursed her lips, a dull ache tightening in her chest.

>"There's no time to worry about it now." He placed his hand on her back and turned her toward the sub-train car, "This mission is too important."

>She allowed herself to be ushered forward, her mind whirling in rapid thought.

>"But he wouldn't DO this." She insisted, hesitating in the doorway, "I know him."

>Angel stood outside the door, his face a mask of stone.

>"No. You don't." he stated grimly, pressing the button to close the door and stepping back.

>The door shut with chilling finality and the car's engine roared to life. Angel, Willow and Oz watched as the car disappeared into the transit tunnel and was gone.

>"I thought things would be different this time." Oz's gravelly voice was heavy with regret, "He was like his old self again. I was sure it would be different this time."

>Willow wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head sadly against his shoulder.

>"It's not your fault, Oz." She stroked her hand along his shoulder, "Sometimes these things just happen."

>Angel folded his arms tightly across his chest, his eyes narrow and dark.

>"It just goes to show you." He grumbled bitterly, "History repeats."

>* * *

>The two men, one old and the other young, picked their way through another ruined sector of the city. The younger tried his best to keep up with his older self on the uneven ground.

>"Where exactly are we going, Gab-?" Gabriel paused as he clambered over an unsteady pile of rubble, frowning. "What should I call you?"

>The old man smirked at his dilemma.

>"You might as well call me Wanderer." He said, "That's all anyone around here has known me as for the last twenty years anyway."

>"All right . . . Wanderer." Gabriel nodded thoughtfully.

>"Come on, it's not much farther." Wanderer urged insistently, "This way. This way."

>As their detour got further underway, the old man was becoming more and more driven, pressing selflessly forward, his limp becoming less and less pronounced.

>"We really should hurry." Gabriel checked his watch again nervously. The mission had been scheduled to launch in less than twenty minutes. Hopefully, they wouldn't be too angry with him if he arrived late.

>"I TOLD you, this will be worth it." His elder self assured him, "Trust me."

>They approached a particularly wasted area, dominated mainly by a shattered metal statue. It stood over thirty feet tall, its head and one arm broken off and its torso twisted and bent. A scorched plaque at the base of the statue identified it as a memorial of some sort, but most of the words had been scored beyond recognition and Gabriel could not read the name.

>"Come here." Wanderer beckoned, standing next to a towering pile of broken stone and metal. "Help me move this."

>"This!" Gabriel exclaimed. "There must be a ton of rock there!"

>"Keep your head on straight, kid." Wanderer gripped a large stone and pulled on it, rolling it away from the pile. "We only have to clear away the front. It won't take long."

>Gabriel hooked his fingers into a conglomeration of cinder blocks and strained to lift it, tugging it back, clear of the pile. Within a few minutes, they uncovered something. It was the head of the statue, turned on its side. The face was that of an older man, perhaps in his early thirties, with a kind, open expression and a well-groomed tracing of beard around his jaw. Its features were battered and dented from years of neglect, but its identity was unmistakable. Gabriel had seen that face before, in the memorial room at the Resistance base.

>"Xander." Gabriel stared at it in awe.

>"Yeah," Wanderer commented shortly, seeming unable to look at its unblinking, unseeing eyes, "They put it up just after he got elected to the senate, but the demons trashed it a few months later in an attempt to break his influence on the people. I think it actually bolstered his position."

>He got down on his hands and knees and reached under the head, into a narrow space formed between its cheek and the ground. Stretching, he closed his fingers around something and withdrew it.

>"Ah," he smiled to himself, holding a small metal object up in front of his eyes, "Right where I left it."

>Gabriel knelt to get a better look at the object. It looked like a bladeless sword made of bronze.

>"Is-is that what I think it is?" he asked reverently.

>"The Sword of Seals." Wanderer answered, "I hid it here before I went to Washington and joined the Resistance. I was afraid someone would recognize it and connect me to the Hellmouth. I'm kind of glad now that I was too superstitious to destroy it."

>"If we can close the Hellmouth, the war will be over." Gabriel rose quickly, "Come on, we have to get back to the central base before they launch the mission."

>"No time." Wanderer slipped the Sword into his tattered coat. "We'll have to try and meet up with them at the Tower. You came out here by sub-train, didn't you? If we can get to the tube in time, we should be able to catch them."

>"Let's go."

>* * *

>Willow worriedly watched her husband pace worriedly back and forth across their bedroom, his forehead knotted in troubled thought. Ever since the mission to invade the Tower had been launched, he had been very agitated. She was sure she knew why.

>"Oz, please, sit." She urged, catching his hand as he made another pass. "This is NOT your fault."

>Oz's lips tightened and he slipped his hand out of hers, reaching up to tug at his beard.

>"Where could he have gone?" he wondered aloud, "And why?"

>"You've been asking yourself those same questions for twenty years now." Willow put her arms around him and rested her head against his shoulder. "I don't think the answers are anymore clear now than they were then. Maybe Angel was right. Maybe history is doomed to repeat itself."

>"No." Oz shook his head sadly, "This time it was different. HE was different. I can't believe he would abandon us again. I was sure he came back to set things right."

>"I wish you wouldn't torment yourself over this." she wrung her hands together in worry. He had reacted in much the same way twenty years ago, the first time Gabriel had disappeared, "Please, stop worrying about it, at least for my sake." Oz rubbed his eyes tiredly and stretched.

>"You're probably right." He sighed, giving her an appreciative squeeze, "Maybe I'll go down to the briefing room and see what Angel is up to. You coming?"

>"No," she shrugged half-heartedly, "I have a few things I'd like to take care of here. Maybe later."

>"Okay." He kissed her on the forehead and left the room.

>As the door closed behind him, she turned and went into the small alcove that was reserved for her spell casting. Gathering up a metal bowl and few bags of herbs, she crossed over the boundary of a protective sigil that had been painted on the floor. She sat down in the center of the painted circle, folding her legs under her, and laid the bowl and the herbs aside. Closing her eyes, she searched for the inner calm that was required for intricate spell casting and laid the translated tempus spell on the floor in front of her. Missing or not, she would keep her promise and send Gabriel home.

>* * *

>Angel slumped in the shadows of his usual chair, facing the multitude of security cameras, his hands folded neatly under his chin. The sturdy, metal briefing room door opened and someone walked inside.

>"Any chance you're watching HBO?" Oz mused as he stood behind the high-backed chair, his eyes skimming the monitors perfunctorily.

>"They're getting close." The vampire indicated one of the monitors on the lower left hand side.

>"Who?" Oz squinted at the black and white picture, "Is that . . .my daughter? Where are you getting this feed from?"

>"Alex's helmet." He nodded curtly, "I had Marcus fit it with a remote camera when he repaired it, so I could keep an eye on the mission."

>Oz grabbed a chair and dragged it over next to Angel.

>"You're worried about her, aren't you?" he asked knowingly.

>"I'm worried about ALL of them." Angel asserted, a little too quickly, "This is a delicate operation. We both know that their chances of getting out of this aren't good even if they succeed. And the price of failure . . ."

>"I know." The old werewolf sank down resignedly into his seat, "Either way, it ends tonight. After fighting for so many years, it's almost relaxing if you think about it."

>"There are worse things than war, Oz." Angel whispered grimly, "Remember, I know what it's like on the other side. So far, you haven't seen anything. "

>"Is that what you're really worried about?" Oz surmised quietly, "Or is this about Alex?"

>"I don't know what I'll do if she doesn't make it back, Oz." His hands tightened reflexively on the arms of his chair, "I wish I could have been closer to her, but it was too hard. She's so much like . . . her mother. "

>"Her father, too." Oz reminded him, "He was a good man, once. I wish you'd remember that."

>"Good men don't abandon their obligations, " Angel muttered bitterly, unconsciously looking to the monitor again, "no matter what they are."

>"I don't know why you -" his keen eyes caught something on one of the viewscreens and he froze, "Angel, I thought all the sub-train cars were out?"

>"They are." Angel sat up in his chair, alarmed.

>"Then why is the incoming light on." Oz pointed to the flashing light above the loading tunnel.

>"Sound the alarm, Oz. Then get your wife and hustle it back here." Angel ran to the door, dread heavy in his voice as the first demons emerged from the transit tunnel, "We're being invaded."

>* * *

>Glancing at the small screen of her hand-held geometer, Alex raised her hand and called for a silent halt, checking her watch. Blue, Yellow and Green squadrons were already assaulting the outside of the Tower by now. After a nerve-wracking trip through the transit tunnels, Red Squadron had arrived in the forbidden zone. Then they had proceeded on foot through a series of twisted underground passageways, a legacy of the burrowing demons who had been the first to come through the Hellmouth, until they reached a point directly under the Tower.

>"This looks like the place." She said, pointing to a dark, valve-like growth on the ceiling of the cavern. "Who's got the neuro-box?"

>Cavanaugh handed her a small black box with four short needles jutting out of the corners on one side.

>Darlene cupped her hands together into a sling and Alex stepped into it, allowing herself to be lifted toward the ceiling. Reaching up, she pressed the needles of the box into the fleshy edge of the valve and activated it. There was a very faint whirring sound as the

neuro-box generated a muscle relaxing charge and the valve hatch fell slack. Originally, the neuro-boxes had been developed for medical use, but it turned out that they worked equally as well on the organic constructs the demons favored, acting like a skeleton key.

>"All right, everyone up, single file." Alex commanded, "Dar, I want you to take the bomb and go up there first, then start pulling everyone else up behind you."

>"Sure." The tiny blonde smirked, accepting the capsule shaped explosive and tucking it under her arm, "I'll be the sacrificial meat. See ya in a minute."

>Effortlessly, she leaped up and grabbed the edge of the circular opening and, sliding the bomb through, pulled herself over the lip after it. Hanging her arm over the edge, she reached for the first soldier's hand and hauled him up. In a moment there was a steady flow of nervous soldiers filing through the open valve. Alex was the last, choosing to cover the rear until all her soldiers reached the upper level.

>"Geez, it stinks up here!" Darlene complained, hoisting her friend up through the opening with one hand and holding her nose with the other.

>"That means we're getting close." Alex noted, "We'd better hurry."

>They quickly advanced down the oddly empty corridor in tight formation. They approached an archway with a wide, railed catwalk supported by evenly spaced pillars and overlooking a huge central chamber. With a silent signal, Cole and his squadron separated and scurried to the other side of the archway while Alex's team pressed cautiously against the wall on their side. Holding their rifles guardedly, a pair of scouts, one from each team rounded the corners in opposite direction, brandishing their weapons.

>"It's clean." They reported softly, drawing the barrels of their guns back up.

>Both squadrons slipped through the archway. Cole pressed his back to a lumpy pillar and peered around the edge of it, over the lip of the railing and down into the bowl below.

>The chamber was massive. He estimated that half the Resistance base could fit in it with room to spare. It was almost a perfect sphere shape with thick, horizontal, ring-shaped ribs running along the edges. Dozens of valves, similar to the one they had used to gain access to the Tower were scattered along the different levels, all interconnected by a web of bony catwalks. In the direct center of the chamber atop a high, stair-lined dais, there was something so horrible that it took his breath away.

>A twenty-foot high pool of brick red light shimmered within the frame of a sturdy, upright semi-circle of polished stones. Unnatural shadows and dark, sinister shapes danced close to its watery surface, waiting anxiously to be released. A sound like the squealing of a hundred thousand pigs reverberated endlessly from the high domed walls and the sickening stench of sulfur and brimstone was overpowering. A bone-chilling feeling of absolute evil emanated from the structure, a testament to its pivotal role in the fall of humankind.

>"The Hellmouth." Cole breathed in awe, "It really exists."

>"Not for long." Darlene grinned recklessly, hefting the bomb and readying her rappelling rope with her other hand.

>"So where are they?" Cole scowled, "This place should be crawling with demons."

>"I don't know." Alex squinted, peering over the edge of the catwalk,

"but I don't like it. I expected the place to be poorly defended, but not empty. It doesn't make sense."

>"Who cares why?" Darlene shrugged, looping the supple rope around one of the thick, organic pillars and cinching it tightly before tossing the other end over the railing, "Let's get down there and blow that thing to pieces."

>Nimbly hopping up onto the lip, she paused and flashed Cole a devilish smile before slinging the bomb over her shoulder and dropping over the edge. Alex hesitated uncertainly, apprehension in her eyes, then slipped quickly down the rope, reaching the floor only moments after the slim blonde.

>"This place is HUGE!" Darlene marveled, clapping her hand over her mouth as her last word echoed around the bowl. "I bet we're the first humans to ever set foot in here."

>Cole dropped to the floor beside her and drew a well-used pistol.

>"Save the sight-seeing trip, Dar." His dark eyes scanned the numerous alcoves carefully, "Let's just set the bomb and get out of here, okay?"

>As the rest of their comrades touched down, Darlene, Alex and Cole made straight for the Hellmouth.

>"Here," Darlene tossed the remote detonator to Cole, "I'll set it up and when we're clear, you can knock it down."

>"You sure the range on this transmitter will give us enough clearance to escape?" Cole looked the remote over suspiciously.

>"My brother made it." She answered simply, "That should be all you need to know."

>Darlene stopped just in front of the Hellmouth, her delicate features bathed in its rusty, crimson light. The vile portal seemed to sense the nearby presence of humans and the living shadows trapped within flitted about excitedly.

>"Ugh," Darlene made a distasteful face and knelt, wedging the head-sized bomb against the base of the dark stone structure. "Talk about freaksome."

>"Hurry it up, Dar." Alex urged, "I want to get out of here as soon as we can."

>"There." She straightened and stepped back, "All done."

>"Good. We're halfway there." Cole turned, signaling to his squad. "Everybody out-oh, shit!"

>Alex and Darlene started, then froze in fear as they saw the towering figure standing in one of the passageways over Cole's shoulder. Fides spread her arms wide and a flock of demons rose up around her.

>"Stupid mortals." The armored creature sneered in her resonant, echoing double voice, "Even now, your home base is about to be overrun by my finest troops. I thought I might miss the festivities, but your leaders were kind enough to arrange for a house call. Welcome, children of the Human Resistance, you've just walked into your own graves."

>The soldiers formed a rough circle, turning their backs to one another defensively, as cackling demons of myriad shapes and sizes began appearing in the open passageways of the upper levels. Alex cocked her shotgun and inhaled a deep breath.

>"Guys," she whispered tightly, "I think we're in trouble."

>* * *

>Oz entered his family's quarters and slammed the door behind him, muffling the deafening blare of the alarm system behind it. His heart was pounding like a jackhammer in his chest. Invasion. The word sent

a shiver of sick dread through him. How had the demons known? Where had they come up with enough fighters to stage an assault?

>"Willow!" he shouted to the seemingly empty room, "Willow?"

>He turned the corner into her spellcasting alcove and found her sitting crosslegged in the center of a protective circle inscribed in the floor. She was in a deep trance, murmuring low and steady under her breath. Damn it! Why now? He knew better than to disturb a spell in progress. Why hadn't she warned him?

>Oz didn't want to leave her here alone, but Angel needed him back at the briefing room. He was faced with a difficult choice. Defending the base meant leaving his wife unprotected, but staying with her could spell the end for everyone. One thing he knew for certain, hesitation would help no one.

>He left the room and closed the door behind him, making sure that the locks were all in place. Touching his fingers to the runes which had been scripted on the frame of the door in sequence, he activated an extra precaution, a seal of magic. The runes had been placed long ago, intended as a secondary line of defense in case the conventional locks failed, but had never been tested. Hopefully, their power would still be potent after all this time.

>He ran back to the briefing room as fast as he could. He paused before entering, his breath harsh and labored. It had been too long since he had seen battle, he wasn't ready for it. The door opened and Angel pulled him inside. He was wearing his old Black Squadron uniform and he appeared to be ready for battle. Hefting an automatic rifle and cocking it, he slipped its strap over his shoulder and tossed another, far larger weapon to Oz.

>The old werewolf caught it easily. It had one large barrel surrounded by a ring of smaller barrels aligned around its outside edge. He could see that the ring was controlled by a motor which would rotate it so that each barrel would in turn meet with the firing mechanism.

>"A chain gun?" he raised his eyebrows incredulously.

>"Yeah, but be careful," Angel stuffed a pair of pistols into his friend's belt, "Marcus said the cooling system isn't quite perfected yet."

>"So what's the plan?" Oz accepted a handful of ammunition clips and stuffed them into his pockets.

>"There is no plan." Angel snorted, "The PLAN was to invade the Tower, not fight off invasion ourselves. I've mobilized as many Academy students as I could get and sent them down to the transit docks. We'll have to cut them off there. If they keep coming inside, it's over."

>"After you." Oz hefted the huge chain gun and stepped aside to allow Angel to pass.

>* * *

>Darlene fired her rifle at an agile, gray skinned demon, grazing it and driving it into a group of its companions. She fired a few rounds on the other side of the group, herding them into an even tighter mass.

>"Thank you." She quipped cheerfully as she slung the hand-sized grenade launcher out of its holster on her thigh and fired a shell directly into the center of the group.

>The shell detonated violently and more than a dozen demons died screaming in an explosion of searing bluish chemical fire. The shell had more impact than she had anticipated and the force of it almost knocked her off her feet. She stumbled as the shockwave hit her and the grenade launcher flew from her grasp.

>"Damn it!" She swore, diving to the floor as a winged demon soared down at her from one of the upper levels. Three bullets smashed into its side and the creature veered wildly and collided with the wall. Cole paused as he ran by to give her a quick nod before charging a pair of two-headed vulture-like beasts.

>She slipped her feet under her and started to move after him when another hail of bullets from behind distracted her. She whirled around and saw Fides closing on Alex, who fired another volley of shells from her shotgun into the creature's belly with no effect. Darlene was caught for a moment between going to Cole's aid and helping her squad leader.

>She saw Cole fire two bullets into one of his opponents' heads at point blank range, spraying dark blood and skull fragments into the air. The demon didn't die though, the second head taking control of the body and lunging at him with a taloned hand. The Gold squad leader ducked instinctively, barely avoiding decapitation, and scrambled away from the second monster. Shooting Alex a regretful glance, Darlene leveled her rifle at one of the bird-men and charged after Cole. Alex could probably keep for a few minutes. Cole might not be so lucky.

>Alex backed steadily away from the towering demoness, firing a steady repetition of bullets into its chest. Load, point, fire. Load, point, fire. Sparks flew and the bullets ricocheted harmlessly off its armored hide. Fides lashed out with a long, sinewy arm and clamped her hand around Alex's helmet. The dark-haired girl struggled as she was hoisted off her feet and brought dangling face to face with the serpentine beast.

>"So you're Buffy Summers' kid, huh?" the demoness leered, waving the tip of a taloned finger under the soft underside of the girl's chin, "You know, she killed my old man. I never got the chance to pay her back for that. Which is not really good news for you, I'm afraid. I have a thing for vengeance."

>Alex unclipped the strap on her helmet with one hand and fired her shotgun into Fides throat as she dropped to the floor. The demoness snarled in rage and whipped the empty helmet across the chamber.

>"I'm gonna kill you!" she shrieked, her shoulder tentacles whipping wildly as she surged after Alex.

>Alex scrambled back along the floor, desperately trying to escape the female juggernaut. Her back came up against one of the fleshy pillars and she was trapped. A drop of chill sweat crawled down her temple and her hands trembled around the stock of her shotgun, one finger tracing nervously along the empty ammunition chamber.

>"You're just a little girl." Fides chuckled, her shoulder tentacles waving slowly to the sides, blocking off any avenue of escape, "What in the world made you think you could take me?"

>"Leave her alone." A young man's voice sounded clear as a bell above the clamor of demonic battle cries and gunfire.

>Fides cocked her head and turned slowly to face the source of the voice.

>"Gabriel." Alex smiled in relief, "You made it."

>He was standing on the lip of one of the bony ridges on the floor next to a disheveled, somber looking old man. A strange feeling washed over her when she saw the two of them standing side by side and she made a heart stopping realization.

>"I told you I'd be here." The auburn-haired young man smiled down at her. He raised his pistol and held it steadily with two hands, aimed at Fides. "Leave her alone." He commanded with a steely voice.

>Fides straightened proudly and sneered. "I don't know how you got here and I certainly wasn't expecting to see two of you, but I don't care. Guess it's just my good fortune." She spread her taloned hands and grinned, exposing jet black fangs, "Twice the fun."

>Gabriel squeezed the trigger and a bullet exploded, directly between Fides' eyes in a flash of light. The giant demoness howled and clutched her face, stumbling and falling to one knee, unharmed, but temporarily blinded.

>Gabriel and the old man nodded quickly to one another and jumped down from the low ledge, splitting up and running in opposite directions. The old man ran down to Alex and helped her to her feet, dragging her out of the range of Fides blindly swinging limbs.

>"Who are you?" she shouted above the din as he pulled her down behind the cover of one of the ridges, narrowly avoiding the fiery breath of a lizard-like demon.

>"Call me Wanderer." the old man crawled up next to her and pressed his back against the ridge looking at her with a mix of wonder and pride in his eyes, "I'm . . .a friend. "

>"Well, friend, you better take this." Alex slipped a PL-122 pistol into his hand, "You're going to need it."

>* * *

>"We have to get to the transit docks!" Angel shouted over the deafening whine of the emergency alarm, "It's the only way we can cut them off!"

>A group of half armored and disoriented soldiers rushed to a junction in the corridor and began firing around the corner.

>God, they're already in this far? Angel's dread deepened. Raising his rifle up to his shoulder, he leaned around the corner and fired a spray of bullets into the advancing horde of demons, sending half a dozen to their deaths.

>More demons entered the hallway, coming from the direction of the transit docks.

>"We'll never make it through! They've gotten in too far!" Oz shook his head helplessly, squinting as he fired a burst from the heavy chain gun, "We need to retreat to some place secure."

>"You go." Angel backed away and cut down another wave of attackers with a rapid tattoo of gunfire. One of their number got too close and he was forced to smash the butt of his weapon against the creature's jaw, "Go to Willow, your room's the most secure place in the base!"

>Oz drew one of his pistols and finished the fallen demon with a well-aimed blast, keeping pace with Angel's fighting retreat.

>"And what about you?" he shouted, bringing his chain gun around to bear again, "Where will you be?"

>Angel kept his attention focused on the far end of the hall, "I have somewhere else to go."

>They came to a fork in the corridor and Angel started down one of the branches.

>"Hold the junction for as long as you can." He shouted, "Then go to your wife."

>He paused for a moment, turning to look at his old friend with deadly seriousness.

>"It's been an honor serving with you, Oz. With all of you." He said in a low, emotionally strained voice, "You've been the best friends I could have ever hoped for."

>"You, too." Oz saluted the vampire sadly, knowing that this was

probably the last time they would ever see each other. He had only a moment to contemplate, however, before the beginning of the next wave of demons entered the corridor.

>* * *

>"Come here, puny worm!" Fides bellowed as Gabriel danced away from her enraged swings, firing his pistol continuously into her body.

>He leaped high over a savage lunge and turned in mid-air. One of Fides' whip-like tentacles snapped into his back and he hit the floor hard. He rolled with the impact and came to a skidding halt on the far side of a thick column, with one hand touched to the floor to catch his balance. He winced with the pain. If he hadn't been airborne when she had hit him, the blow might have split him in two.

>Gabriel slipped a fresh clip into his gun and fired three more shots into Fides' chest. The bullets bounced harmlessly off her armored hide. Shooting her was pointless, her scaly skin made her impervious, but he couldn't think of anything else he could do to try and stop her.

>"You can't stop me." She grinned evilly, as if she could read his mind, and bounded forward.

>He fired again instinctively and Fides snorted as the bullet deflected harmlessly off the side of her neck. Snapping her leg forward, she planted her taloned foot deep into his belly. Gabriel shoved backward desperately as he felt her claws cutting into his skin, barely avoiding disembowelment as she raked her foot to the floor. He tumbled haphazardly and clambered unsteadily to his feet. The front of his uniform tunic had been ripped away, exposing four bloody furrows running lengthwise along his muscled stomach. Although messy and stinging horribly, they were not life-threatening.

>Tucking his gun into the holster on his belt, he felt the reassuring weight of the Sword of Seals in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Fides grabbed him by the shoulder and whipped him around, driving her hard fist into his wounded stomach. Gabriel flew back and slammed into the wall, breathless and gasping in pain.

>"You're a foolish little child." Fides snarled angrily, "Just like you always were. No wonder you ended up a nothing."

>Gabriel tried to run to the side, but the tip of one of Fides cruel whip-appendages lanced through his shoulder, piercing flesh and grinding against the bone. He screamed and fell back against the wall again, his hand clamped over the bloody wound. Gabriel glared hatefully at her as she inspected the end of the gore-stained tentacle with relish.

>"I remember you, too." He gasped, favoring one side heavily, "I haven't forgotten, Faith."

>Fides was taken aback, her glowing orange eyes widening with surprise.

>"You know who I am." She chuckled with dark amusement, "Oh, this just keeps getting better and better."

>The demoness lashed out with her hand and pinned Gabriel's head to the wall, the hardness of her palm pressed tightly over his mouth.

>"I wouldn't say I've held a grudge or anything." She leaned in close to him and snorted hot breath across his face, "But it always irked me the way you just split after that first fight we had. I took it out on the old man a little when I finally got my hands on him. It's nice to know you're going to know who's killing you this time. Go ahead and beg if you want. It's been such a long time, I'd love to see that desperate look in your eyes again."

>Gabriel squirmed and worked his mouth up over the edge of her palm, his eyes holding hers with a steely glare.

>"Look at my eyes, Faith." he twisted in her grip and swiftly brought his pistol up, pressing the muzzle of it against her wide, left eye, "And all you'll see is the end."

>The demoness' mouth opened wide in a scream of denial as he squeezed the trigger.

>* * *

>Cole fell under the crushing weight of one of the two headed vulture men, the butt of his pistol bucking hard against his chest as he emptied a full clip into the demon's body. The creature jerked and then went still. Nearby, Darlene blasted a hole in the other bird-man's foot then whipped her rifle up and fired a second bullet into the underside of its chin, taking the top of its remaining head off.

>She slipped the rifle strap over her shoulder and started tugging the first bird-man's corpse off Cole by the leg. Coughing, he squirmed out from under the heavy weight and shoved it aside. Blood trickled from his scalp down the side of his face.

>"You okay?" Darlene gripped him by the hand and pulled him to his feet.

>"Yeah, I think so." he answered, ignoring the wound on his head and holding his side. Dar remembered that he had hurt his ribs during the assault on the data repository and wondered perhaps if he should have remained behind at the base to heal. No, Fides had said that the base was being invaded at this very instant. I hope Mom and Dad are all right, she thought worriedly.

>"Shit!" Cole swore venomously, digging a crushed black box out of the inside of his jacket.

>"Oh no," Dar gasped, pressing her small hand to her mouth, "the detonator's history. What are we going to do?"

>"Hey guys," Alex rounded the corner and fired her shotgun, one-handed, into the stomach of a swooping demon, dropping it. Wanderer followed up quickly, firing two bullets into the creature's head, ensuring its death.

>"Alex, you're okay!" Dar threw her arms around her friend's neck and gave her a quick squeeze, "Who's the old geezer?"

>"He's on our side." Alex sighed, smiling softly, and patted the old man's shoulder, "Where's Gabriel?"

>"He's here?!" the tiny blonde exclaimed excitedly, whirling and pressing her back against Alex as she fired a shot from her rifle into a short, charging demon, "I TOLD you he'd show up!"

>Cole fired an extra bullet into the creature's body as insurance and shook his head somberly, "Not good. He's tangling with Fides. He's as good as dead."

>"No." Dar protested loyally, "He fought her before. He can do it again . . .right?"

>Alex let her head hang, shaking it sadly

>A high pitched keen cut through the room and the dark-haired girl looked up in time to see Fides fall, black ichor spurting from her face. Gabriel scrambled across the floor, clutching his side and ducking between two short demons while shooting a third through the chest.

>"What's he doing?" Darlene gasped, her blue eyes wide with awe.

>"The Hellmouth." Wanderer declared, noting the bladeless Sword of Seals in the boy's hand, "He's heading for the Hellmouth."

>"Then we should cover him." Cocking her shotgun, Alex raised it to her shoulder and picked off a four-armed demon as it leaped for

Gabriel.

>"Let's go!" Cole lead the charge for the Hellmouth, firing his handgun at any demons who came close to Gabriel as he ran.

>Gabriel ducked around the wild swing of a thick-necked canine demon and fired his handgun blindly in its direction. He was rewarded with the sound of a high-pitched yelp as he mounted the bottom step leading up to the Hellmouth.

>This close to it, the sound emanating from the portal was almost deafening. The swirling, black and red gate pulsed with evil luminescence, seeming to add strength to the host of demons that swarmed nearby.

>A hideous creature whose face was almost entirely lost in a set of wide, fanged jaws rose up next to him, its thick, corded arms drawn back to strike. Gabriel tried to shoot his gun, but the firing mechanism just snapped, out of ammunition. The demon's body bucked and lurched forward sharply, its black eyes suddenly glassy. As Gabriel fumbled to load a fresh clip into his gun, the creature collapsed, three holes blasted out of its back. Across the room, Alex smirked and gave him a short salute, propping her smoking shotgun easily over her shoulder. Gabriel smiled his thanks to her and bounded up the stairs.

>The portal throbbed and the squealing pig sound grew even louder for an instant. Within its murky depths, the shadowy shapes flitted about madly, intelligently. Gabriel stopped on the precipice, his reloaded gun in one hand and the Sword of Seals in the other. The glowing, watery gate bulged outward and the dark outlines within began to take on definition. He was too late, the Hellmouth was opening!

>Lunging desperately forward, Gabriel drove the Sword into the portal. Its invisible blade met resistance from the mystical doorway, sinking slowly into the shimmering energy as if it was cold tar. Hot, blue-white sparks exploded from the point where Sword met Hellmouth, showering over him in a blinding cascade. The skin on his arms started to singe and turn pink from the heat, as dozens of taloned hands pushed through the gateway. Gabriel squinted his eyes against the bright sparks and leaned hard on the Sword. The weapon gave, but only slightly, sinking barely a few inches into the yawning Hellmouth.

>The clawed hands were grasping at him now, digging at his flesh and drawing blood. It was too hard. The Hellmouth had been open for far too long, he couldn't fight it. One of the emerging demon limbs pawed at his two handed grip on the Sword, attempting to break his hold, and soon others followed. A gangly blue-skinned hand grabbed his face, pushing his head back, it's taloned thumb shoved up his nostril. Gabriel bit down on the creature's tough skin until it twitched in pain and jerked back through the portal.

>"Close, damn it!" he shouted angrily at the magical gateway, as if he could command it, "Close! Close! Close, damn you!"

>The Sword of Seals loosened suddenly and plunged deeper into the Hellmouth and he felt the whole structure shiver. The dozens of demon arms drew back, fearfully, sensing his impending victory and the Hellmouth itself seemed to give one last effort to reject the Sword. Gabriel planted his feet and shoved with all his strength, driving the Sword all the way up to the hilt in an explosion of sparks.

>The chamber plunged into eerie silence and a previously unnoticed gloom lifted from the place as each one present, demon and human alike, stared in awe. Gabriel fell weakly to his knees before the cold, framework of polished stones, now empty. Spots danced before

his eyes and there was a ringing in his ears as the Sword tumbled from his fingers.

>Alex, Darlene and Cole ran up and joined him on the dais, surrounding him and firing a flurry of bullets down into the stunned demon horde. The creatures, already discouraged by the loss of the Hellmouth, scattered, screaming and fleeing into the tunnels. They had been promised a harvest of conquest. Instead they had reaped ruin.

>As the three fired a few final shots and the remaining squadron soldiers assembled on the dais, Gabriel felt a pair of strong hands grasp him by the shoulders and pull him to his feet.

>"You did it!" Wanderer grinned proudly at his younger self, "It's over."

>Alex clapped her gloved hands together, "All we have to do is blow this place up."

>"Yeah, about that." Darlene reached up and tapped the dark-haired girl on the shoulder, holding the broken black box in her other hand, "The detonator is sorta broken. Crushed, actually."

>"Then we set the timer." Alex crouched next to the bomb and started pressing buttons, "Even with the Hellmouth closed, the Tower is still a huge threat. We may never get a chance like this again. Leapfrog a signal for the other squadrons to withdraw." After a few beeps, a red digital display lit up on the front panel.

>"There." She brushed her gloved hands off against one another, "Fifteen minutes ought to be enough."

>"And if one of the demons returns and disarms it?" Cole arched a blood-caked eyebrow.

>"Don't worry about it." Darlene scoffed, "The arming mechanism isn't complicated, but there isn't a demon on the face of the planet with enough technical skill to build a bicycle, let alone disarm one of these. Let's just get out of here before they regroup."

>The two squad-leaders gathered together what was left of their troops and formed into a rough spearhead formation, headed for one of the lower tunnels.

>"That's the one we came in through." Wanderer indicated as they approached the perimeter of the chamber, "We can follow it all the way back out to the surface."

>Gabriel stopped at the rear of the formation, leaning weakly against one of the huge fleshy pillars.

>"The Sword of Seals. I have to go back for it." He straightened and turned to Wanderer, "Keep everyone moving, Wanderer, I'll be right behind you."

>"You're too weak." The old man protested. Behind him, Alex and Cole noted the exchange.

>"No time to argue." Gabriel set out across the corpse-strewn chamber toward the dais, "Just get everyone out."

>"Where's he going?" Dar asked.

>"Nevermind." Alex said shortly, her green eyes following him as he went back into the heart of the Tower, "You heard him everyone. Move out!" Despite the confidence of her command, she lingered, still watching him as the remaining soldiers retreated down the corridor.

>Wanderer appeared next to her and laid his hand on her shoulder. "I'll make sure he gets out all right." He promised, smiling.

>As he started after his younger self, Alex hooked two fingers in the crook of his elbow and spun him around. She looked him in the eye, nervous and uneasy.

>"I know who you are." She said so softly that he almost didn't hear her.

>"How?" he asked in a choked voice. She reminded him so much of her mother at that moment that it was hard to speak.

>"I knew it as soon as I saw the two of you together." She said, indicated Gabriel as he mounted the stairs to the dais, "I see things, too, like you do. Like both of you. I just thought you should know, in case . . ."

>Wanderer ducked his head in shame, "Alex, I'm sorry, I never would have-"

>"Don't." she raised a staying hand and shook her head, "Just go with him. And make sure you both make it out okay."

>Wanderer smiled and nodded, backing away from her, watching her for a brief moment as she returned his smile and turned down the corridor, before running to catch up with Gabriel.

>The young man was weakened, but determined, nursing a wounded shoulder and numerous less serious injuries. He found the Sword of Seals right where he had dropped it. Stooping, he slipped it into the pocket of his jacket.

>"Um, Gabriel." Wanderer tapped his shoulder lightly and pointed at the explosive lodged at the base of the empty stone framework, "What happened to the timer?"

>Gabriel looked up and his face registered shock. The timer had gone blank and the bomb was inert now. As he bent low to inspect it, a swift, dark form darted out from behind the standing stones and Wanderer leaped to intercept it.

>"Gabriel! Look out!" his voice turned into a wet whoosh of air as the dark shape collided with him and catapulted him down the stairs.

>The creature whirled with blinding, sinuous speed and clamped a hard, taloned hand around Gabriel's throat, jerking his body into the air and holding him aloft effortlessly.

>"Hey, handsome." Fides leaned her fanged mouth close to his ear and sneered, black fluid pumping slowly out of the ruin that had been her left eye, "Miss me?"

>* * *

>Oz stood before the door to his quarters with his feet planted solidly and the chain gun bucking violently against his arm. A storm of bullets ripped into the bodies of the oncoming wall of demons, but the seemingly endless flow of invaders would not abate. Smoke started to rise from the continuously spinning gun cylinder and the heat of it was beginning to scorch the hairs off his knuckles. He wouldn't be able to keep this up for much longer. Retreat was his only option. Deactivating the magical wards with his free hand, he fished in his pocket for his keycard and slipped it through the slot.

>Cutting another wide swath through the evil creatures, he backed into the open doorway. The chain gun jerked in his hand and seized up, having reached its limit and overheated. He dropped it to the floor and reached for the pistol at his waist. Unleashing a flurry of cover fire, he stumbled back into his room and jammed the door shut. Within seconds, he could hear the pounding of demonic fists as they attempted to batter the door down. It would hold. He and Willow would be safe for now, at least. He was more concerned for Angel at the moment.

>* * *

>A horned demon fell to a hail of bullets and Angel ran halfway down the metal stairwell and hopped over the railing to the floor. The damn things seemed like they were everywhere. The realization only underscored the need to resort to his desperate plan.

>Slinging his rifle over his shoulder, he approached the first of the

three giant, metal vats. A solid pump mechanism whirred and ground steadily, purifying and manufacturing holy water before depositing it in the vat. It had been a long time since he had been down here. In the last few years, he had neglected most of the base, even his own quarters lately, choosing to spend his time in the briefing room. It was hard to remember where everything was. He located the lever that controlled the vat pump and shut it down. With the flow halted, he was able to start the build-up of pressure that he would need. Now, all he needed was a sturdy hose. He found one in a tall storage container and hauled it over next to the intake valve for the fire extinguisher ducts.

>Angel understood the consequences of what he was about to do, but it didn't matter anymore. He was ageless, which meant that violent death was the only way out. It was just a matter of time. He might as well make his death worth something. One end of the hose clamped in place, he dragged the rest of it over to the pump mechanism.

>On the upper level, a group of demons bounded into the room, nimbly scaling the walls and leaping along the ceiling. Angel opened fire with one hand while attempting to anchor the end of the hose with the other. The shots went wide, ricocheting off the wall just above one of the quick moving creatures. He barely managed to lock the hose in place as another of the beasts touched down next to him. He aimed his gun in its direction, but the demon was too swift and caught him across the face with a heavy fist. Losing grip on both gun and hose, he rolled across the floor and crashed into the storage container, nearly toppling it on himself.

>The vampire climbed to his feet, his face distorted into its own demonic mask. "Okay, now you made me mad." He snarled, grabbing the creature by the head and smashing it against the wall.

>A second demon tackled him from above, wrapping its arms around him in a vise-like grip. He smashed his head back instinctively and shook free, spinning into a powerful punch and following with a sharp kick. The creature fell aside, snarling as two more of its brethren dropped from the ceiling. Angel spread his arms defensively and turned carefully in a circle, attempting to keep all his opponents in view and protect his back.

>Four on one. He had faced worse odds before, but not recently. Fortunately, he was in the mood for a fight. The four demons were of the same type, all human sized and gray skinned with jagged, bony facial features. He would have to keep them off guard, prevent them from attacking him en masse while still guarding the transfer hose until the vat built up enough pressure. Shooting a quick glance over his shoulder, he took note of the vat's pressure gauge. Only halfway full, it would need a lot more time to peak.

>Leaping forward, he struck one of the demons in the face and kicked back at another. They were nimble and difficult to hit fully. The one he had kicked sprang against the wall and bounced back at him. He spun away from it and clubbed it to the ground with an elbow to the small of its back.

>Two more of the gray-skinned demons hooted to their companions from the upper level, crawling over the railing and bounding to the floor. In two quick leaps, they joined the circle surrounding Angel.

>Six on one, he considered apprehensively, not favorable odds at all.

>* * *

>"There are advantages to having once been human." Fides observed, holding a small bent wire up between two razor sharp talons of her free hand, "Like being able to wrap my head around these wonderful little inventions you Resistance people keep coming up with when none

of my servants seem to be able to grasp them. No one's blowing up my Tower."

>Gabriel struggled in her grip, reaching for the gun in his belt.

>"I don't think so." Fides ripped the weapon out of its holster and tossed it aside. Gabriel heard its echoing clatter off in the distance as she shifted her grip and held his face up to hers.

>Wanderer stirred on the floor and sat up dizzily. He was hurt, but nothing seemed to be broken. If only his younger self had figured out Fides' weakness sooner. Or fired a little straighter. He struggled to rise and his fingers brushed the cool, hard surface of an unfamiliar weapon, a gun of some sort, but his eyes refused to focus on it. Atop the dais, Fides leaned forward and pressed her face into Gabriel's.

>"You hurt me, child." She hissed venomously, "No one has ever hurt me before. Ever. I'm going to introduce you to torment like you've never known."

>Gabriel stirred, his vision blurring in and out of focus.

>"Look behind you." He choked around her tightening grip.

>"What?" Fides frowned in confusion.

>As she turned to look behind her, Wanderer brought both his arms up and jammed the barrel of the grenade launcher into her open mouth. Fides froze, mid-motion and, for the first time since she had achieved Ascension, she felt fear.

>"Goodbye, Faith." The old man whispered as he jammed his eyes shut and pulled the trigger.

>The launcher's shell wedged into her throat and exploded, disintegrating her demonic flesh from the inside out in a blast of blue fire. The majority of the fireball was contained by Fides' armor, destroying the grenade launcher and slamming Wanderer down on the dais. With nowhere else to go, the blue-white flames rushed up inside the demoness' skull, searing away her corrupted brain and bursting from her nostrils and eye sockets in long, azure jets. Her heavy body collapsed, releasing Gabriel's limp form, and twitched unnaturally for a moment, then lay still.

>Wanderer crawled over to the corpse and turned its face toward him. Now, it was little more than a smoking, empty skull encased in impenetrable armor.

>The old man breathed a sigh of relief that he had been holding for twenty years, "She's finally dead. It's over."

>Gabriel stumbled to his feet, with blood dribbling out of his nose and cradling one arm against his side, "Not yet. Look."

>Wanderer's eyes followed his younger self's indication and saw the movement of the gathering demons in the chamber's many exits. He knew that they wouldn't have stayed routed for long.

>"This looks like it." He snapped two fresh ammo clips into his pistols, preparing for one final run.

>"There's still a way." Gabriel indicated the inert explosive, "The bomb can be set manually."

>One of the most important lessons he had ever learned had been from Angel, not long after he had first met the vampire. Sometimes what someone wants to do and what someone needs to do are not the same thing, he had said. Gabriel believed this to be one of those times.

>"You want to go out with a bang, huh?" the old man smiled wryly.

>Gabriel shrugged sadly, "I don't belong here. Who knows? Maybe I won't even die at all. Get out while you still can."

>"Forget it." Wanderer shook his head, jerking his thumb over his shoulder, "They'd be all over you in a second. You need someone to cover you."

>"But what about Alex?"

>"She's been without me all her life. It's a little late for me to be with her now." He looked at his younger self with deep conviction in his eyes, "You said it yourself. I don't belong here any more than you do. This time I want it to mean something when I go."

>Gabriel smiled, pleased that the old, embittered man had finally found the self-respect he had lost so many years ago.

>"Just one more thing." His elder self held tightly onto his good arm, "If you really don't die, if somehow you end up back where you came from, don't make the same mistakes I made. Don't lose her like I did."

>Gabriel nodded and shook Wanderer's hand, feeling moisture gathering in his eyes and an emotional tightness in his chest. He wasn't sure whether the man was talking about Buffy or Alex. Maybe both.

>As the old man walked over and took up a guard position at the head of the stairs, Gabriel knelt down before the bomb with his wounded arm held curled against his side and ran the sweaty palm of his other hand nervously over the leg of his uniform. Alex and Cole had been gone for a few minutes now, enough time to get clear, and the Hellmouth was closed. All that was left to do now was to tie up loose ends. He placed the Sword of Seals atop the explosive and flipped the arming mechanism open. The explosion would be more than enough to destroy the artifact. His fingers trembled and a queer sensation washed over him. He shook his head to clear it and pressed the button to begin arming the bomb.

>The demons were starting to regroup in force now. He would have to hurry or the resurgence would become too great for Wanderer to handle. The old man shouted and snarled in challenge to the gathering demons. One of the demons ventured forward and he shot it neatly through the chest. The creature's body jerked and collapsed in a heap and the other demons shrank back cautiously. They were still in shock over the loss of their leader, but it wouldn't last for long. Demons existed to kill and as soon as they realized that only two humans remained to resist them, they would be on them in a wave.

>Already, one of the group, a stocky, black-skinned beast with a pair of long, blade-like horns jutting out of the backs of its wrists, was getting brave. Growling low in its throat, it gripped one of its companions and threw it forward. Wanderer blasted a hole through the demon's chest without batting an eyelid, dropping it dead in an instant at the foot of the stairs. The black-skinned demon leered, a plan forming in its twisted mind. It barked an unintelligible command and two of the smaller demons cowered in fear. After a second shouted command and a sharp gesture in Wanderer's direction from their de facto leader, the two creatures stepped forward. Both fell to well-aimed bullets and slumped to the floor.

>"Gabriel, hurry it up!" the old man called, "Our hosts are getting antsy. I don't want to have to deal with more dance partners than I can handle."

>"I'm trying." Gabriel shouted back as he tinkered with the bomb's controls, "Just hold them off a little longer. I need to be able to concentrate."

>He watched as another pair of demons advanced on Wanderer and the

man shot them. More followed and he fired five more bullets, killing five more demons. Just a few more moments. That was all he needed. The tingling sensation washed over him again and his concentration faltered. He wasn't feeling just nervous anymore, something was happening to him. He tapped another number on the small keypad and the shaking in his hand worsened. The sensation hit him again, harder this time, and his whole body convulsed. He had felt something like this once before. The tempus spell! No, not now! Clenching his fist to steady it, he pressed down on another number.

>His body became insubstantial and his vision blurred. He struggled to finish inputting the code, scrabbling wildly with his good hand as he faded out of sight.

>Wanderer fired wildly into the group of demons with both hands, not even bothering to take the time to aim anymore, as they advanced en masse up the stairs. He kept pulling the triggers until both weapons were empty and their firing mechanisms just snapped ineffectually. Dread knotted in his stomach as he realized he was out of ammunition. He hoped that he had bought Gabriel enough time to complete his task.

>The black-skinned demon emerged from behind its remaining cohorts and stepped over the pile of bodies strewn across the steps.

>"You're friend is gone." The creature chuckled, stroking its long wrist blades slowly against one another, "And you're out of ammo. I'd say this means that our little game is over."

>The creature advanced confidently, its thick arms hanging casually at its sides. Wanderer struck out desperately with the stock of one of his empty pistols, but the demon caught his swinging wrist in a crushing grip and drove its other fist into his stomach. The old man screamed in blinding pain as the long, bony blade gouged up into his ribcage and pierced one of his lungs. The creature jerked the blade free and threw the old man's limp body back against the stone framework that had once housed the Hellmouth. He landed in a heap, crumpling forward over the bomb and the Sword of Seals, blood that came from deep inside him drooling down his chin.

>"You may have closed the Hellmouth." The black-skinned demon walked up to him with its cohorts gibbering and growling in support close behind it. "But there's still plenty of my kind left. We'll reopen it and crush you humans once and for all."

>Wanderer struggled to sit up. His body was wracked with pain. It was utter agony just to draw a breath, but he wouldn't surrender. He owed it to Alex. And to himself.

>Slumping across the floor, he stretched his arm out and turned the explosive over, reaching for the hilt of the Sword of Seals. But he was barely strong enough to reach it, too weak to wield it as a weapon. He was utterly defenseless.

>The demon stood over him and grinned evilly, "Give me the Sword, old man."

>Wanderer sat up and coughed fresh blood down the front of his shirt. His pain-ridden eyes fell on the explosive and a tiny, blinking red light and his lips twisted into an ironic smile. He looked the black-skinned demon straight in the eye and grinned with bloodied teeth, his hand hovering over the explosive's detonation button.

>"Go to hell." He spat, slamming his palm down hard.

>* * *

>Alex watched from a distant bluff as the Tower exploded in a column of smoke and flames. A massive mushroom cloud roiled, rolling into the sky, accompanied by a flash of bright light and a sound so loud she felt it echo in her chest. The leading edge of the blast was

greatly weakened by the time it reached her, little more than a wall of hot air. It was enough though to dry away some of the tears that crawled slowly down her cheeks.

>"Goodbye, Gabriel." She whispered to both of them, her voice low and tight and her cheeks wet, "Father."

>* * *

>Angel hit the floor hard and skidded on his back. He was bleeding from a wound on the side of his neck and his body was bruised and sore. The pressure gauge was almost full now. He estimated less than a minute before the entire complex would be doused with holy water. Swiping one of the demon's feet out from under it, he dove headlong for his rifle. A second demon clutched at his ankles, clawing its way up his legs. Surrounding him, the other five creatures hovered with bloodthirsty anticipation of his destruction.

>His fingers caught the edge of the rifle and he managed to pull it into his grasp.

>"Get off me!" he growled, firing a burst of bullets into the beast at point blank range, pulverizing it.

>Rolling, he fired a steady stream of bullets and bounced to his feet. Three of the demons fell back, clutching gaping, burning holes in their chests. The last two leaped over the bodies of their brethren, claws outstretched. He fired the last of his ammunition into one of them, leaving his gun empty as he was forced to duck, narrowly avoiding the other's attack. The beast squared off with him, diving forward and tackling him into the tall storage container.

>The pressure gauge hit its peak and a buzzer went off, pumping thousands of gallons of holy water into the extinguisher ducts. A high powered spray erupted from the ceiling, cascading down into the chamber below like a rainstorm. Angel smashed the butt of his rifle into the beast's forehead and kicked his opponent off him and into the main part of the chamber. It screamed as the falling holy water seared into its skin and started melting the flesh underneath. Angel pulled the jacket of his uniform over his head and cowered against the front of the storage container as best he could.

>"I'm coming to see you, Buffy." he closed his eyes and imagined what the afterlife would be like for a reformed vampire as the first droplets soaked through to his skin, "It's finally over."

>* * *

>Oz prepared himself as the door shuddered and fell inward, finally succumbing to the endless assault from without. A tangle of demons scrambled inside, flattening the metal door as they came. Oz started firing both his pistols, standing guard before the entrance to Willow's casting chamber, as the overhead extinguishers activated and showered the room with cold, clear liquid.

>The mass of demons screamed piercingly as one and collapsed, writhing and spasming on the floor as the spray seared into their evil-born skin. Oz touched his fingers to his lips and tasted. It was just plain water. Horror twisted in his stomach and his heart became heavy with loss. It was not plain water at all. It was his oldest friend's gift to the movement that had become like a cherished child to him.

>* * *

>"The explosion was unbelievable." Alex reported dutifully to her parents, "There's nothing left of the Tower but a big, lumpy mess."

>The squadrons had returned less than an hour ago and the news was spreading fast. There was no need, however. A person only had to look skyward to know what had happened. The smog had already broken up in many places, lingering only along the horizon.

>She tilted her head back and looked up into the newly clear night sky. There were so many stars, more than she had ever imagined possible. She would always love the stars because her father had made them his gift to her.

>"I'll never forget how brave they were." Alex added sadly, "But I felt the heat of the blast from over five miles away. There's no way there were survivors." Cole stood behind her and awkwardly attempted to put his arms around her in a comforting embrace. To his surprise, she accepted the contact and leaned back against him.

>"He finally redeemed himself." Oz smiled bittersweetly, "I always knew that someday he'd come back."

>Willow curled happily against his side and he wrapped a thick arm around both her and Darlene, taking comfort in the company of his family.

>"With the hellsmog lifted, transmissions are starting to come in from all over." Angel sat across from Alex in a metal wheelchair with his hands folded in his lap, the soft surface breeze ruffling his short, dark hair. His skin was reddened and puckered with mild burn marks, but, overall, he was in good health. They had found him sealed inside one of the storage containers on the lower level, buried under the protection of hundreds of feet of industrial tubing. A few bandages and a liberal application of healing salve provided by Willow and he would be back on his feet within a few weeks. "They say the Hellspires are rotting away and demons are falling by the hundreds. The war is over."

>Angel's face clouded over and he rubbed the back of his neck uneasily, looking up at Alex with regret in his eyes. The destruction of the Hellmouth seemed to have lifted his usually stern demeanor. He spoke to her now with a note of compassion in his voice.

>"Alex," he began softly, "I'm sorry. Someone should have told you who he was before . . ."

>"I know." She smiled softly to herself, her hands laid over Cole's and her eyes turned skyward, "I figured it out for myself. But I'm not sad now that he's gone. Somehow, I can tell that wherever he is, he's okay." She watched as a small point of red light twinkled in the sky and her green eyes became misty, "I just know it."

>* * *

>Everything had gone dark and he felt like he was falling. The sensation rushed over him in dizzying waves and he tried to scream, but no sound escaped his throat.

>And then, all of a sudden, he WAS screaming. He was standing in the office of Mayor Richard Wilkins and his arm was broken. The tentacled Kevares demon thrashed and writhed on the threshold of a portal to the demon dimension, in the midst of its death throes. His father, caught in the convulsing grip of one of the creature's sprawling limbs, was being dragged screaming across the floor, steadily closer to the yawning portal to Hell. He was too far away for Gabriel to reach, but overhead, the Sword of Seals jutted from the forehead of the dying demon. If he leaped with all his strength, reached with all his power, he might be able to retrieve it . . . No, he had been given this choice before and he had chosen wrong. He'd had no idea of the consequences. Not this time.

>He had no option but to watch as his father continued to scream as he was dragged through the swirling, mystical gateway. The sound of his cries was cut short, swallowed by the portal. Gabriel watched through pain-blurred vision as the Sword of Seals glowed hotly, spraying a shower of sparks in all directions as it, too, crossed through the portal. The rift collapsed in on itself with a wispy pop and then the room was silent. Gabriel stood as still as stone,

paralyzed with shock, hot tears crawling slowly down his cheeks.

>"Sometimes what someone wants to do and what someone needs to do aren't the same thing." He whispered, too low for anyone else to hear.

>A new wave of sickness washed over him and he felt like he was falling again. Jamming his eyes shut, he gritted his jaw against the strain.

>"You live too much in yesterday. You would do better to think about tomorrow." The old troupe mother shifted stiffly in her huge wicker chair and handed him a cup and a saucer from the stand next to her. "Here, a cup of tea will help calm you."

>"W-What?" Gabriel stammered, blinking his eyes and looking around in confusion.

>He was back in the gypsy camp, sitting before the troupe mother, about to undergo the tempus enchantment and change the future. He was home, he realized, back in nineteen ninety-nine feeling like he had just awoken from a long, vivid dream.

>His wounds had disappeared as if they had never been, but his ears still rang with the death cries of a dozen demons and he was sure he could still smell the scent of gunpowder faintly in the air. It hadn't been a dream. It couldn't have been.

>"Tea, my dear boy." She repeated, rattling the cup close to his face.

>"Oh, yes, thank you." He accepted the cup gratefully and took a sip to steady himself.

>"Are you sure you want to do this, young man? It is a very serious undertaking." The old woman watched him carefully, reading him with her jet black eyes.

>"No." He answered, rising slowly to his feet. "No. I should leave, now."

>"Are you feeling well?" she asked as he stumbled weakly for the door.

>"I'm fine." He said, pushing out through the motor home's aluminum-plated door and into the open and breathing deeply of the clean, cool air. He looked up into the sky and noted Venus's glittering red light with a wistful tear in his eye. "I think I feel better now than I ever have."

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>AUTHOR'S NOTE

>For those of you who may be interested in the rest of the series and/or may have missed a piece or two of it, below is a list of the stories with short descriptions.

>

>
DIVERGENT PATHS - Coinciding with the discovery of an artifact with the power to close the Hellmouth, a mysterious stranger arrives in Sunnydale with abilities that rival the Slayer's. Will he be a powerful ally for her, or bring about her downfall?

>
TO HELL WITH TOMORROW - Thirty-five years into the future and Slaying has taken on a whole new scope. Gabriel Giles attempts to cheat death and learns that things happen for a reason.

>
BAD BLOOD - A familiar face comes to LA, forcing Angel to confront both a violent killer and his lingering feelings for Buffy.

>
RETURNS - Spike and Drusilla return to Sunnydale over the summer, but they aren't the only familiar faces turning up. Planning to steal the powers of the Slayer and Seventh Son, they cast a dark shadow over the reuniting Chosen Ones.

>
POOR MISS EDITH - Before coming to Sunnydale, Spike and Drusilla

lived in Prague, Czechoslovakia and battled with a young Gabriel Giles.

>
REDEEMED - Five months after 'The Wish', a new Slayer arrives in Sunnydale to aid the Whitehats and faces off with a very different Seventh Son.

>
BOY'S NIGHT OUT - While the girls have a night to themselves, the boys go looking for fun and run afoul of a demon with a taste for young men.

>
HISTORY - Threatened by the possible return of the Master, Buffy is forced into a hard choice between love and duty.

>
FACING FEARS - Buffy's been dumped and three different men plan to take advantage, Riley, Parker and the newly-reborn Master. Meanwhile, Gabriel is targeted by the Initiative.

>
A DAY IN THE LIFE - When Buffy and Gabriel get turned into children, Willow and Xander must assume the roles of Slayer and Seventh Son. But which is the greater problem, Sunnydale's vampire population or two rambunctious toddlers on the loose?

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End
file.